it's a game of survival

by SarahRoseSerena

Summary

Like a rock falling to a river, one decision can change everything. When it does, nothing will ever be the same again. Not the dragons or the wolves or the lions or the Night King. Growing pains, and reaching for the sky, and gifts granted they never imagined, and a world always trying to take from them. If they want their happy ending, they're going to have to fight for it. And fight. And keep fighting. They won't ever surrender.

"Will you be queen of the ashes? And him king of his graveyards? Is that why we worked so hard for the Iron Throne?" her Hand demands.

"This is not about a throne," she says, turning to Jon. "It's about people, mine and yours. It's about family. It's about building a new world out of the ashes of the old. A better one. But I can't do that alone."

"You're not alone," the Northman swears. "You'll never be alone again. Wish that it were, but it's not the time for lofty goals or good dreams. It's about survival. Just survival. That's not pretty."

Chapter 1

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Hardhome

Dusk is on the horizon. The elders have scattered, sending outriders to call their clans forth. Hopefully they'll have them loaded onto the Royal Fleet and setting sail back to Eastwatch by tomorrow, if nothing more goes wrong. Which is shite to rely on, he knows, because that's not how his life happens.

Jon is following the child, Karsi's little Willa, as she leads him and his Watch men to borrowed shelter for the night, when something monstrous soars overhead.

The winged shadow skims across the village and his neck cranes, feet faltering, watching it go. Watching it loop. Watching it descend. His heart stops. Everything he's seen... He still can't quite believe his eyes. He's frozen. The heavy flap of wings in the air like thunder, drowning out the sudden screams in his ears as wildlings scramble in the mud, making way.

He's just barely convinced them to follow him south. He can't imagine a dragon dropping down from the sky on them is going to affirm their leap of faith.

And drop it does, landing in the middle of them all, its impact quaking through the ground, jostling people off their feet. Its horned neck bends in then stretches high, head tipping, like a wolf with a wet coat shaking off water. Its reptilian tail flicks out before curling, catching a couple archers at the middle, knocking them away while their arrows hit its hide, dull daggers to stone, useless. When aggressors push through the panicked crowd, surging towards it with spears and swords, it screeches in rage. Snaps its wings at them to keep the fighters at bay.

The sound rattles through Jon's chest, that screech, setting loose his stuck breath, unsticking his feet as urgency flares up past the shock.

Why doesn't it burn us alive?

He's running then, crossing the distance, panic and instinct, his men behind him. He shoves at Tormund's shoulder, catching his attention, passing him by. Yelling, "Wait, wait! Don't attack! Stay back! Wait!" Arms wide, trying to quell people.

"Crow," Tormund says, settling at Jon's side. He jerks his chin. "Look."

He follows his gaze, manages finally to see beyond the beast, noticing the splash of bright white amidst the black scales and spikes. "Gods," he breathes in wonder, confusion, horror. "There's a girl on its back."

A pale girl in a white dress, moonshine hair spilled around her, tiny against the behemoth she's slumped atop. Her head is hidden, but her limbs are slack, unmoving fingers hanging down the side of its lower neck. Now that he sees her, he's seeing more of the beast as well. Seeing the way it hunches the top joints of its wings, creating a cradle to keep her there. The way it tilts itself, this way then that, balancing her body when she starts to tip. The way it watches him back, meeting his eyes when he looks away from her, something obviously intelligent there, something expectant. Demanding.

Not human, but almost understandable. Like looking into Ghost, if Ghost were alien to him.
The beast bends the tip of one wing, extending it backward, like a misshapen hand sweeping quick over the girl's body, just shy of grazing. Soothing, or gesturing, he's not sure. But then the wing unfurls, the deadly tip digs into the mud, crooked at what must be an elbow. Holds it there like that, rigid, and bucks its snout in impatience. It takes him a minute, staring dumbly, before he realizes. It's made a ladder out of that monstrous wing.

"I think— I think it wants us to help her?" he figures, frowning. Shares a bewildered glance with Tormund before he starts to take a step forward.

The wildling grabs his elbow. "You're fucking insane. What're you doing?"

"I don't know," he murmurs, pulling free, easing closer.

All of Hardhome is frozen, breathless, grips anxious on their weapons. Jon lays a trembling hand on that taut leathery flesh and the beast shifts its feet, making him jerk back. When it only huffs another obviously irritated gust of air out its nose, he swallows, steels himself. Takes hold of a spike and gets his footing. Climbing the wing. Its spine shivers, almost toppling him off, when he crosses the thick hump of its back. Feels the scalding heat and coarseness of its skin even through his gloves. It vibrates faintly beneath him, a constant hum of strange life and restrained motion. Bridled fire.

His heart hammers too intensely.

The girl is a woman, pale skin under dirt and soot, rips and red ruining the dress, which had originally been fancy, something summery, something nobody within a thousand leagues would have reason to wear. She's bleeding, just a slow seep from somewhere under that rich fabric, but there are several wounds in sight. A slash on the upper arm, a crisscross of fresh lashes across the back as if from a whip, what he knows is a mangled arrow exit at her shoulder. And ice. A thin layer of ice crawls over her skin in too many places, but oddly no black from frostbite beneath.

Which makes him think she's dead. Had to have been dead before the frost crystallized her.

But he takes that waterfall of hair and hooks it aside, touches hesitant fingers to her throat, and she's nearly as warm as the dragon under them. She's also breathing. It's hard to tell with the beast moving, but he rests his palm to a spot of uninjured back and feels it rise beneath him, a labored breath, too shallow. Relief sparking, he huffs a kind of strange laugh, not wanting to imagine what the beast would do if he laid down a dead woman before it when it clearly cares for her.

Jon turns her slowly, and she lets out a shuddering exhale, pain wincing in her brow, flickering across her exquisite face, but her eyes don't open. Carefully, very carefully, he corrals her up from between the horns, taking her into his arms. Once she rests against his chest, he mutters, "It's alright. You're safe. You'll be alright."

Leaning back, he has to dig his boots into its hide to help him slide down.

"Find a healer," he tells Tormund, who meets him at the wing's tip, eyeing it warily. The only time he takes his eyes off it is to onceover the woman, cocking a brow. Arms full, Jon strides past him, carrying her through the parting crowd, up to Townshall, knowing he'll falter if he dares look back for the beast's approval.

In his wake, the dragon rumbles in warning.

Jon has no trouble understanding its meaning.
Crying. She hears their cries, screaming, dying. It's a blur, but she knows the emotions that claw at her chest. Everything else is mercurial, fleeting, changing, slipping through her fingers like sand. But not that, not the emotion. Fear, anger, helplessness. Despair. Failure. It's etched into her soul, chiseled on stone. She wants to help them. She was supposed to save them. She doesn't know how. She doesn't know anything anymore. All that's left is the crying, somewhere, out there.

Daenerys jolts awake in sharp screaming pain, bites her tongue on it as her body arches, mind wild but the instinct to withdraw still strong. She's in darkness and colder than she's ever been in her life, even though her blood is on fire.

She keeps herself stiff as soon as she's aware, feeling the tug of ripped skin protest. Lips parting, she sucks in air with uneven heaves, shaking fingers moving to her stomach, where her dress is gone and bandages pile thick, wrapped around her torso. The edge of her middle, burning, searing pain. Her fingers graze the cloth and she remembers an ugly face beneath the gold mask she'd wrenched off, remembers the brutal cold of his sword shoved through her. It tries to flash at her mind, rile the terror up her throat again to choke her, but she screws her eyes shut and cuts it off.

Forces it away. Clears her head. Calms her thundering heart.

Where am I? Am I safe? Are they dead? Are my people...

There's a man in the room with her. She becomes aware of him very suddenly, eyes snapping open, scanning the darkness. There's a lit hearth close to where she's been laid, but the firelight plays dancing shadows across the shoddy wood planks of the wall, nothing else. Above her, she sees stars on a black sky, an opening in the roof of this crude structure. There's nothing but fur within her reach, no feasible weapon of any kind, and her body lets her know it won't be running.

"I won't hurt you."

"No, you won't," she agrees, perfectly imperious, even from flat on her back.

He moves slowly into the light, not coming to her but to the table on the other side of the hearth, picking up a cup, a pitcher, pouring water. He's not looking at her, very specifically not looking. But she puzzles over the sight of him, heart hitching uncomfortably, wanting to be free of the pain so she is isn't as vulnerable, wanting answers. His voice is rough, but quiet, a very particular rolling. That accent… It reminds her of Jorah. She's never heard another man sound quite like that.

Not too many northerners roaming the Essos desert.

It hurts to push herself up, takes too long, too much effort. She doesn't manage to keep her expression from twisting with it, but at least she doesn't make a sound. She puts her bare feet to the frozen floor, looking for some kind of anchor to make her feel less unmoored. It doesn't help.

"You're the Dragon Queen," he says. "The last Targaryen."

"Yes." The word comes on a hard exhale, a fine sheen of sweat on her pale skin. "And you are?"

"Jon Snow." He's come to her now, knelt down beside the pallet of a bed they've laid her on, handing her the water. She doesn't like the way her grip makes the cup waver in the air between them, so she lifts her gaze to appraise the man instead. Finally he's looking at her, and she wishes he wouldn't, meeting those dark eyes, intent and searching. There's something too intense about them, too focused, some kind of well of emotion pushing up from inside there while his face remains solemn and unreadable. "Lord Commander of the Night's Watch."

"Night's Watch," she murmurs to herself, confusion crinkling her brow. She'd been just about to
drink, but surprise stops her. "I'm in Westeros."

"No."

"I don't understand."

He bows his head, mostly to get away from her gaze. His expression becomes… Well, she's not sure. It's distraction and deep thought and hesitation before a reluctant hope, she thinks. There's grimness to him, a lot of grimness, yes, and something else. A brief second of something that's obviously out of place, something raw when he admits, "I think you may be the miracle I prayed for."

That soft rasp worries her. "How so?"

"Do you know where you are?"

"Farther north than I've ever been," she guesses. Draws from the cup to soothe her stinging throat, but winces at the shock of it. She's never touched water so cold. "I can tell that from the ice in my veins."

He huffs a breath of air, something like a laugh. Shifts back on his haunches, resting an arm on one bent knee. "You're the hottest thing I've ever felt besides your dragon. You're like touching the flame."

"I still feel the cold," she returns. Then his words sink in and surprise rolls through her again, a deep and altering and unsettling surprise, followed closely by suspicion. "What do you mean you've felt my dragon? He let you touch him?"

"Well, I certainly couldn't levitate you off the thing, could I?"

"You pulled me from him," she says slowly, and that unsettling feeling turns to cold deadly stone, hanging on a precipice.

Jon Snow seems to sense the danger, but doesn't know what to do with it. "You needed the help. If we hadn't got you tended by a healer, you might've bled out, or festered, or froze solid. I imagine the only thing that saved you was your dragon flying so high so long, since the cold slowed the bleeding."

She puts the cup to her lips again, listening to him talk, trying to pin down her flitting thoughts. Too many questions, too much uncertainty. And the small things are distracting her from the larger problems. She feels exposed, knowing her dress is gone, knowing someone had their hands on her while she was out, while she was powerless. They've wrapped her in some kind of fur and leather contraption. It's too thick and too stiff and makes her feel confined more than the limitations of her wounds. She feels mud crusted from the healing poultice that's pasted to her shoulder. The abrasions on her wrists have been cleaned, the split in her lip, the scrape at her cheekbone, another wrap across her back. She's cold and she's sore and she's hungry and she doesn't know where in the world she is or what is happening to her city right now or who this man is or what she's going to have to do about him.

"How did I get here?"

Half his mouth upturns just slightly. "I said. Your dragon. It brought you—"

"Him," she cuts in, voice sharp. "Drogon is not an it."

Jon Snow gives a solemn nod. She doesn't like the way he's watching her, but she can't find a sound
reason for the feeling. She gives him the empty cup and tries not to whine as she forces herself out of bed. It doesn't work. He rises to get out of her way but has to catch her at the elbow when she nearly buckles halfway up. Frowning as he says, "You shouldn't be walking yet. You took quite a beating. Who knows how long you were up on that—" Her sharp glance stops him short. He swallows. "Drogon," he finishes more carefully, easing her back down to the furs with just as much care.

"What did you mean?" she questions, irritable from her own helplessness and taking it out on him, hating the way she's tired out just from failing to stand, just from breathing. She tugs her arm from his fingers and resentfully obliges, laying back onto the mounds behind her. "When you said I was your miracle. What is it you need?"

"Aye," he counters, another not quite laugh escaping him, moving back as soon as he's not holding her anymore, "I imagine you get a lot of people coming to you with their wants, if the rumors are true. You've got dragons, you've got armies, you freed Slaver's Bay—"

"Trying," she cuts in, abruptly angry, fire licking through her. "I'm trying to free them. To keep them free. It's not easy when people refuse to stop insisting I allow the masters free reign, running around wrecking havoc. I should've listened to myself, you know. I should've executed them all as soon as I took the cities."

He blinks, boots shifting slightly backward at the snarl. Reappraising her.

"They said I couldn't do that. They said I didn't want the people to see me as a monster, a Mad Queen, but what does that matter if the cost is so high? If people are going to die for it? Innocent people that've already spent their whole lives being victimized, people I promised I would protect."

"Do you—" He stops himself. Reconsiders. She doesn't like the way he's watching her, that wariness, that pause before judgment. As if he's weighing who she is, who she might be, with who he needs. "I'm not a politician," he decides on, looking like he's risking his neck to be honest, "and I've never had any power, but seems to me it's not a good thing to get in the habit of killing anybody you don't like."

That doesn't make her happy. That makes her much angrier. She sneers up at him, thinking, You're just like all the rest. "I am not a politician, and I'm glad for it, because it's a waste of time. It's a liability. It only ends up hurting the people it rules, feeding the egos of all the men on top. It's a trick, is all it is. A sleight of hand. They talk and talk and talk, move pieces around a board, tripping each other up, thinking they're so clever. They make the smallfolk believe it's true, that their power is real and there's no use fighting them, but it's all a lie. They don't have real power. I have real power, and when I bring it to them, they learn how meaningless all their tricks truly are. As soon as they don't have the backs of thousands of sufferers to step on, they have nothing. I've seen too many dead children staked in the sun to worry about people disapproving of my methods, my lord. If they think I'm mad, if they think I'm the monster, then they're weak or stupid or part of the problem. Men that have been party to such atrocities don't deserve mercy. I knew it, and I let clever men convince me it wasn't the right choice. And now, look where it's gotten me. And my people…"

He's staring at her. He's looking right into her, she realizes, silencing herself with a stark chide. He's absorbed every word. Why the hell did she open her mouth?

Silence echoes in the room, deafening and unnerved, as the fire crackles and the wind hisses outside. He'd seemed to be inclined to think well of her just a few moments ago, and now she's gone and convinced him she's a bloodthirsty savage, raving mad.

"I shouldn't have spoken that way to you," she whispers, going soft, sinking into the furs. Confused by herself, by her own missing inhibition. She must be weaker than she'd realized. "I don't know
you."

The ferocious frustration and fear simmer back to the recesses and she's left with an emptiness, feeling awkward and exposed and off her control. She would've never said something like that, been so open with her thoughts, with anyone when she was feeling like herself. Not Jorah, not Missandei, or Daario. Perhaps it's easier to lay bare before a stranger...

It troubles her.

After awhile, he moves closer again, sits down at the end of the bed. She still can't read his face, but there's a softness in his eyes that draws at her. Caution, wariness clearly, but also still that earlier hope. A wordless imploring. All he says is, "Was that who attacked you? The slave masters?"

"They call themselves Sons of the Harpy."

It's much more complicated a circumstance, but she will not explain herself to this stranger. Lord Commander of the Night's Watch. He could be loyal to the Usurper. He could have sent word of her presence. He could have killed her while she lay unconscious. Instead he tended her. She doesn't know what to think about any of this, of what came before these last few furious days, or what is happening now. She's just so tired.

"If this is not Westeros, and you are Night's Watch, then where are we?"

"Hardhome. On the Shivering Sea. Beyond the Wall. Your dragon has brought you to a very dangerous place, Your Grace, at a very dangerous time."

"I wonder why," she murmurs, studying his face. As if he would have the answer. If she can't manage to understand Drogon's thinking, no one would. To fly so far to this foreign land, over deserts and seas and mountains and ice, for days, while she's injured. To leave her here of all places, with this strange man... Putting that aside, her gaze sharpens, brow lifting. "Your miracle?"

His clouded distraction darkens back to that quiet brooding that seems to be his constant countenance. "What do you know of the Others?" At her blank expression, he adds, "White Walkers. Dead men. You've never heard the stories? Even in Essos, I'd have thought every child—"

"I've heard the stories," she interrupts. "Stories, precisely. Legends from the Lands of Always Winter, yes?"

"Not stories, I'm afraid. They're very much real, and they're building an army of the dead, advancing closer to the Wall every day. That's why I'm here. I'm trying to convince the wildlings to come with me. I want to bring them south, to keep them from joining the numbers of the dead, hopefully to fight with us. I've only got about half here agreed so far. We've been killing each other for centuries. It's hard to get them past that history."

She's absorbing the logistics of that, his reasoning, the current climate of what she's been dropped into, but most of her brain is still stuck at the start. "White Walkers," she echoes. "Ice monsters have an army of corpses and are marching on the Wall. Is that what you're telling me?"

Who are you? she thinks wildly. Where have I woken up?

"Says the woman that rode in on a dragon," he counters incredulously, unimpressed with her skepticism. He shoves to his feet, agitated by her very predictable disbelief and the fight he'll have ahead of him in convincing her. "They are very real, Your Grace, I assure you, and we're running out of time. No one knows how to stop them. The only thing that's worked yet is fire and dragonglass. You have dragons, which means you have fire, which means we're going to need you
and your beasts in this fight if we're to have any chance of surviving winter."

"I have greater concerns at the moment than Westeros fairy tales, my lord," she replies, exasperated. Hadn't she just told him her cities are falling apart? She has slavers to tamp out. Governing to figure out. And now she's fallen into the lap of a northern madman somewhere in the middle of a frozen tundra.

Drogon better not have gone far.

"Don't look at me like that," he argues, gruffer now, frustrated. Like he'd expected better of her. Busies himself with refilling her cup. "The world says the same thing when people whisper about you and your dragons. Thought as much myself, and yet I stood staring up at a great beast today, saw him, felt him, understood him. He's real, as they're real. You're the Mother of Dragons, aren't you? How can you doubt it?"

"Doubt you, you mean," she corrects archly. Palms pressing to the furs, pushing herself slowly upright, ignoring the tightening ache of her back and the vicious punch in her stomach. "A man I just met, that I've never heard of before, that I've never even seen in the light of day. You'll have to forgive me, my lord, since I've woken on the other end of the world at the mercy of a—"

Hotly, he twists back to her, cuts in, "At the mercy? Have I threatened you?"

"You'd be a fool to," she coolly informs, one eyebrow quirking at him. "But that doesn't change the fact that I am, for the moment, apparently stranded under your care with only your word to take at face value for any of this. For where I am now, never mind what waits out there."

Her imperiousness never falters, but something in her words must betray her, because it moves him. His expression smooths. His body eases from the rigid tension it'd held a second ago. Sympathy softens him, just a little shame entering those dark eyes. His chin drops, pulling in his thoughts, his turmoil, setting aside the urgency that obviously drives him. With a decided sigh, he moves. Coming back to her. Standing over her. Quietly offering out the water in apology.

She spends too long in stillness, neck tipped, lost in his gaze. Measuring him. Every other man that's tried to come this close to her, to tower above her, had been meaning to scare her into her place, intimidate, remind her viscerally of their size, their strength, to bring to mind just how vulnerable she is, on her own, trapped in a small weak womanly body. She hasn't been impressed by that in a very long time, but it never seems to stop them from trying. Except this man... He's not imposing. He doesn't want her uncomfortable or afraid or even aware of how easily he could hurt her. If she believes in what she sees, senses, there is no artifice to him. He's just...

_Genuine._

That unnerves her. It's not a feeling she can trust.

"You could be delusional," she says then unnecessarily, testing him. She takes the cup from him, fingers sliding between his as she pulls it away. His hand is too cold. "You could be lying. I could be anywhere. You could be anyone." She licks her lips, jaw working. "I could be your prisoner."

With the barest smile, rueful, he tries to sidestep the trap, "Your dragon was pretty insistent I take good care of you."

"You speak as if..."

She doesn't finish, but it must be on her face, because he replies, "Aye, he makes himself known. However strange the animal, there's always a little human to be found, if you know how to see it."
"Human qualities? No, I don't think so," she murmurs, staring oddly at his face. Head tilting, considering, slyly, "Perhaps it's that you've got some animal in you."

Which makes something new flicker across his face, something intriguing she can't quite name yet. After a moment, he concedes, "Possibly." Then steps back, breaking the strange spell that'd caught them up in its web.

She drinks until the cup is empty again. Contemplates in the awkward silence. Eventually sighs, somewhat surrendering, laying back down. "But since presently I'm stuck here, I might as well hear everything you know about these White Walkers while I rest. Start from the beginning, all you've experienced, how you and your Watch are handling the situation. Afterwards, you just may find me more receptive."

"Aye. I can do that." He won't look at her anymore. Something's changed. "There's meat left on the spoke still, I think." His body makes it clear he just wants to be out of this room and away from her. When all he'd wanted was for her to listen a moment ago, she finds that odd. "I'll be back."

"You will explain yourself, Lord Snow."

"Food first," he defies, making her blink. "You need energy to fight the cold and strength to heal. You eat, I'll explain."

He's gone before she can figure out what disturbed him.

She's alone again, been alone for awhile now, she thinks, drifting back to consciousness with great effort. Blackness between hazy glimpses of a daylight grey sky above her, snowflakes falling on her face. It reminds her of a dream, one that's haunted her for years, so foreign yet familiar that it takes a moment to remember how it's real. She's trying to summon the will to make herself move, drawn to the chaos of hurried voices she can hear outside, when the dogs start barking. And suddenly she's awake, very awake, caught in the sharp grip of urgency and dread.

From all around, they howl in distress. Even trapped blind in this wooden shack, she can feel the stillness that sweeps through. A bated breath of anticipation before people break into frenzy, shouting orders, yelling over each other. True chaos now. She recognizes the sound of horror.

Whatever ache of exhaustion that'd been holding her down evaporates with the jolt to her bloodstream. She rolls, bends at the knee, puts her feet beneath her, pushing forward. A grimace of pain, biting back a cry. Pressing an arm across her burning middle, she makes it to the door and takes a deep breath. Walks out to find herself in another world.

White. She's never seen so much white. Only in her dreams. In the sky, on the ground, in the distance, all around. And grey, like smoke thick in the air, but no fire to create it. An unnatural fog rolling in. Her exhale mists in front of her mouth. Her hand falls to the rail of the steps and sears it. Wind hits her like a blast, invigorating her to new heights of life, yet trying to freeze her in place.

_Hardhome_, he'd said. The frozen valley quashed between towering sheers of ice cliffs and the placid black Shivering Sea. It's breathtaking. It's vast and humbling and terrifying and magnificent, a sight unlike anything she's ever imagined.

There's a split second to take it all in. She hesitates at the top step, just shy of the crush of bodies shoving and trampling each other. Looks on in muted alarm, considers the thousands of people flooding in through the gates, crying for help, killers and innocents alike. A man yells for the gates to
be closed and they barricade it against the helpless. Against whatever runs in their wake. Whatever tears the screams from their throats and thrashes at the timber wall, rattling, buckling. She resolves her decision with grim focus, steps down into the surge to go to the Lord Commander's side.

"Tell them to fall back."

He twists to give her an entirely predictable glance, sword drawn, prepared to push through to the front and fight. But it's the big redheaded man that growls, "You're mad, girl! If that gate falls, we're all dead!"

He says, "We'll never get enough into the boats in time if we don't hold them off."

She levels him with a cold look. Lifts her chin. Commands, "Get your people to the ships, Jon Snow. Make them swim if they must, just get them off land." Then she walks gravely forward through the frenzied crush. Calling for her child.

In the distance, over the howls and screams, an unmistakable roar echoes through the valley. It shakes the ice mountains towering above. Before the winged shadow casts over them, a stream of brilliant orange rains down across the land on the other side of the wall. He crosses the valley, circles back, sets the wall aflame, all the way down its length, buying them time before it falls.

Daenerys can't help but smile.

It's been so long. Like a missing limb, Drogon had shut her out, ignored her call, flown himself so far away that their connection became weak and ashy. All she'd felt for so long from him was his anger at her, for caging his brothers, for chasing him away. For betraying his trust in her. It'd broken her heart.

And then one day, she was caught in the midst of riots. Sons of the Harpy slaughtered her guard and she was surrounded, overpowered, toyed with. They'd meant to string her up on high, humiliate her, teach all her followers the lesson of what happens when you go against the masters. She can still feel the fast excruciating lash of the whip across her back, her strangled cry drowned out by the unearthly screech of rage as her dark child crashed to the ground, rending them to pieces.

In that moment, all she'd felt was joy. Relief. He was angry with her, distrustful, destructive, but he loved her still. He would burn the world for her.

_Monsters made of death and ice_, she thinks, weaving painstakingly between the hard bodies jostling wildly towards the shore. Away from fire and ice. _They'll kill us all_, he'd said. _There'll be nothing left for you to rule, Your Grace. So if you care about life like you say or just power and your reign, you're gonna have to fight with us._

She has to see it. For herself, she knows, she has to see with her own eyes.

Impulsiveness has always gotten her into her worst trouble, but Daenerys climbs the steps and bites back her pain anyway, getting a foot to the rail, getting her hands on the eaves to lever herself up. She climbs to the roof of the quaking Townshall, stands tall, looking over the land. The chaos, the atrocity, the panic.

Flames of the timber wall lick higher into the sky. On the other side, people run, fight, taken to the ground still struggling by ragged rotted bodies. Thousands of them. Corpses that push at the fire jumps and forces them back. It eats at them, disintegrates to ash what should already be dead. She stands frozen, staring in shock, while the building jolts under her feet and the heat from the inferno kisses her skin as snow and cinder coat her from above.
The sight is … unimaginable.

In a heartbeat, it builds her into a believer.

At the wrong end of the Townshall, black flesh and exposed bone latch to the eaves and leaps up. It crouches, joints arranged strangely, cocks its head at her. She starts to step back, heel finding the edge of the roof, stays rooted instead as the thing skitters over the peaks. It jumps, sailing through the air at her with a horrible shriek. She twists, spinning out of the way, catching herself facedown against the snowy roof even as it bursts into flames before it lands, Drogon flying by with a battle cry.

Daenerys watches him go, breathless, clutching the edge.

But the flames catch at the wood, eating it up too quickly, licking down the sides to join the fire raging along the border wall, just as it topples. A horde of monsters washes in, braving the heat, shrieking as they trample each other, using the first ones down as bridges to get across the flames unburnt.

"Come on, girl, move your ass!" somebody shouts. She whips around to find a hulking wildling below her. The redhead reaches up, grabs her by the hips, and wrenches her down before she can decide what she's going to do. She lets him haul her away from the collapsing shack, away from the flames, staying to the fringes of the violent havoc that's filled up the valley.

Then she digs in her heels.

"Where's the Lord Commander?" she demands, eyes following his gesture to the front of the line, held just barely by wildlings and a handful of Night's Watch. "Get him to the dock. Get him on a boat."

"First sensible thing I heard all day," the big man rumbles. Starts to go, but then looks uneasily back at her. "Is your beast gonna kill us all if you die?"

"I won't die," is all she says.

He looks at her face, grim and determined, and gives her a curt nod of similar sentiment before he's shoving himself back into the thick of the fight.

She looks up into the sky and reaches for her child.

+ 

Jon cuts through the White Walker with a wild swing of faith and desperation, Valyrian steel singing. It's gone with an explosion of shattered ice. He almost drops back to his knees, ribs surely broken, breath painful. But his fight hasn't ended. More and more wights are crossing the fire, catching stragglers that haven't made it to the water yet and those that stayed behind to be their shield.

An arrow strikes the corpse lunging for him as he turns around, barely getting his sword up in time to slash it in two. When he turns again, Tormund is there, barreling into him, nearly bowling him over. He grabs at his shoulder and tugs towards shore.

"Time to go, crow."

"What're you doing?" Jon barks, panic spiking. "You're supposed to be protecting the queen." Nothing can happen to her. They need her. She's their best hope. If she's dead, if this miracle has slipped through his fingers in one damn day…
"You say that, she says save you, she's got a fucking dragon, I listen to her," he succinctly explains, dragging Jon along.

They fight off as many as they can on their way. Nearly to the dock, they throw themselves forward into the frozen mud when the dragon swoops low, spreading the field of fire. Soon it’ll overtake the whole valley. Anyone left on land will be consumed. Which would be good, if there weren’t so many people still scrambling in the shallows. He twists around as an axe drives into a desiccated skull jumping for them, Tormund's machete thrusts into the sunken stomach of another, and Jon looks up. Upwards. Over. Watches the beast arc and swirl, razing the dead.

Eyes falling, he finds its mother amongst the chaos. She's coming their direction until something stops her. The woman spins. Dread pushes him off the ground. He rushes to her, cutting through wights in his way. Tries to grab for her as Tormund grabs for him. She breaks away, stripping fast from her outer layer of fur, shouting something at him he can't make out over the din. But he sees it soon, what she's after, sees the child crying under charred stairs, burning all around. And the queen just…

She walks into the fire.

Jon yells, body pulling to go after her, to catch her, but Tormund is forcing him backward, onto the dock. Struggling in his grasp, he watches in horror, in awe, as she brings the child to the shore, shields her with her body. Her unblemished body. The girl, Willa, drops from her arms and runs into the water. To her mother, Karsi, who'd been screaming for her, searching for her, killing everything in her way.

He goes still in Tormund's hold, staring at her as she looks back, her leathers half burned away, her skin smooth. Fire and death haloed behind her.

She starts towards them again. And again, she's jerked short, spinning wild at the sudden screech in the sky. The awful sound piercing in his ears, pain and panic and surprise. Her dragon, his wing clipped by an ice spear, spiraling down from the sky, falling beyond the gates. Lost to the raging fire.

"Daenerys!" Jon calls. Because he knows, he knows, but his friend holds him tight, keeps him still.

She takes a deep breath, wading through the paralyzed shock in a harrowing heartbeat. Lips pressed firm, fingers furling at her sides, she lifts her chin and pushes ahead. Disappears into the blinding heat.

"No!"

"Get in the boat, Snow," his friend says, pulling him ever back. "It's time to go."

"We can't leave without her! We need her!"

"Her dragon will grab her," he lies. Because they all saw the beast crash. But Jon can't. He just can't. When Tormund realizes this, he shoves him. Knocks him into the last longboat waiting.

It rows slowly from the bay, painfully slowly, and he stands at the helm, frozen and helpless, defeated, taking in the grisly hellscape they’re abandoning.

A White Walker advances to the end of the dock, staring right at him. It's not the same as the others. Even from the distance, he can feel that. It raises its arms wide and the unburnt dead rise off the ground, filling up the coastline.

Terror and rage settle deep inside Jon's cold core. Horror. But the hopelessness that comes with it is
only beginning to build when a roar echoes through the valley, and the mountains tremble, ice sliding loose. That swell of hopelessness combusts just as quickly as it'd built, obliterating against the ferocious surge of triumph. Vindication. Salvation. Great black wings spread wide and arc behind what must be the Night King. The queen and her dragon ascend out of the flames, rising high through fire and rain and hail into a storming sky.

They are all left behind, but now Jon has faith.

He has purpose.
Chapter 2

Mother's Mercy

Fire rages all around her, burning at the icy dead. She pushes through the field, searching for her son. Panic and desperation in her throat, thicker than the smoke, than the heat that just kisses her when it destroys everything else. Blindingly bright, all around her, so much orange she can't see what's in front of her, can't see where to go. She spins in circles, calling out for him, hand above her eyes, straining to make out the wild shapes writhing in every direction.

He can't be gone. She can't lose him. Not again. Not another son.

Something cold seeps into her bones, stilling her. Lost in an inferno, she's suddenly freezing. Shivering. Dread twists in her gut. When she turns, she jumps, fear a throttle, coming face to face with a man—Not a man. A monster.

"No," she whispers, a ragged sound from her lips as she steps back, tears stinging on her cheeks. Burning with either the scorch or the freeze, she's not sure. It reaches for her, this thing, and she can't fight it. She can't move at all. She's…paralyzed. A hand at her throat, flesh iced solid, talons for nails, piercing into her, blood dripping free. Blue eyes, dead eyes, gazing into her. Draining at her soul.

In the distance, her child screams...

Daenerys wakes with a strangled sob. Bites her lip, clenches her fists, body shaking from the stifling sensation of paralysis that'd held her still.

The rock rumbles beneath her, trembling as her dragon stomps his way up the sheer ledge and through the mouth of the cave he'd left her in. She feels his urgent demanding before she sees him, pushes herself painstakingly up to her feet as he comes. She tries to summon patience, but his end of their tether is a dark snarl of feelings and instincts that's hard to untangle. A bramble of black twisted thorns. Aggravation, she feels that clearly enough, but the rest is confusing.

He drops his shoulder, snorts out hurryingly, head cocked.

"No, my love. We can't go back yet." As much as she wants to be back in her city, righting whatever disaster lingers there, she's just not yet able. "Your wing isn't ready for that hard a flight. Neither am I." But he nudges her with his snout then, angry, and she stumbles, wincing at the pain of her wounds. Her stomach in particular is especially arduous. So she bites, "Drogon, enough."

But the dragon insists.

More than a little angry herself now, she swallows her discomfort and climbs onto his back. Holds tight as he whirls and leaps off the edge, catching the air, pushing them skyward. She knows he's not capable of taking her back across the Narrow Sea, not yet, not with his wing torn, so she's not sure what he intends. But after everything these last few days, she's willing to let him lead, feels his need and focus through the bramble, the one clear certainty coming down to her end of their tether that he has somewhere to go, somewhere to bring her, something important to do.
Traitor. Carved into the driftwood, nailed to the gate, his epitaph says traitor. Confusion turns to realization, but he fights it, doesn't want to believe it. Is willing to cling to that denial for the fleeting moment he's given until he twists around and gets greeted with a knife to the stomach. Face to face with one of his brothers. With a whole pack of them. The knife pulls out, the man steps aside, and another takes his place, hand clenching Jon's shoulder as he drives his dagger in.

"For the Watch," they chant.

A third strike is coming at him when the dark sky screams. Everybody looks up, but Jon knocks the wrist aside before the blade can catch, and the man drops it in the snow. Thunderstruck with the rest of them, stumbling back. They scatter in fright, not quite quick enough to clear completely before the dragon crashes to the square, jostling the ground under its weight, dropping Jon heavy to his knees.

She's a vision of ragged leather and wild silver hair, too much pale skin exposed to the elements. She slides swiftly from the beast and strides forward, cutting fearlessly between them all, chin high, uncertainty knitting her brow as those stark eyes sweep across the situation. The cold fury her face becomes then makes him shiver. She looks to his wounds, the blood black on the white snow, looks to his men, something dangerous shining there, something destructive.

The beast at her back lowers his neck, bares ugly massive teeth in a reverberating growl, fire thrumming in his chest like it thrums in her eyes, in her restless fingers and the sharp glass of her expression.

For a second, he thinks he's dreaming. He's dreamt of her every night since Hardhome, since a spectacular answer to prayers he'd never voiced landed in front of him, a hesitant hope lifting him from the long held depression of being resigned to defeat. He'd only half believed he'd ever see her again.

But he reaches out as she moves to pass him. His fingers find her wrist. The touch stills her. She's very real under his grasp. Knowing what she means, what she wants, he rasps, "No."

Gazing down at him, those eyes soften. Frustration against pity. She hesitates, reluctant, killer instinct warring with whatever else there is inside of her. He doesn't know if she'll listen, if she'll burn them all anyway, rip Castle Black apart, her and her dragon. He doesn't know her.

Except he feels like he does. He feels like he sees her.

He never thought his men would shove their knives into his gut in the dark, so he could be wrong about so many things. He could be wrong to have put any faith in this unbelievable woman, this foreign queen, this dragon rider.

Surrender loosens her body. Urgency flows forth as the bloodlust ebbs. She turns back for him, bending to him, palm pressing into his bleeding middle to make him gasp. She hooks her shoulder in his underarm and forces him up. Drags him with her over to the beast, who unfurls one wing, slamming it down into the snow, shielding them, blocking them off from the gather of men when they start shouting.

At first he protests, but she ignores him, her and her dragon pushing him up, ignoring the pained yell they tear from him too. He needs to get inside. He needs … help. He definitely does not need to be on the back of a fucking dragon, going Gods know where. But he doesn't really fight her, because he realizes…

He doesn't know who to trust.
Drogon drops them in the snow on a hillside, just as dawn crests, nothing but white as far as she can see, white and the black trees beyond the valley. At the hilltop, a shack waits, tiny and dilapidated, wholly unappealing. But it's the only semblance of shelter she can see in any direction. The Lord Commander needs tending, and Drogon has flown off, so she hooks his arm over her shoulders and rallies him to his feet when he might rather pass out. They struggle to the top together. Find it empty, dust coated and cobweb covered, door broken, old blood soaked into the wood floor.

She eases him down to the one chair that looks like it could hold up his weight and starts searching immediately, scavenging for anything of use. Shaking out once clean linens from a cupboard, scrubbing out a pot and shoveling it full of snow before leaving it by the hearth, wrestling the door shut and propping it barred against the stinging wind. She returns to her companion, tearing strips off the linens, lowering to her knees in front of him, reaching for the ties on his jerkin. Her hands hesitate, afraid to hurt him, but his gaze never leaves her face and he doesn't say a word, so she presses her lips and casts aside the nerves.

He tries to be of help to her, but he's trembling and ashen and the wearying pain is clear in his expression, even though he hasn't made a sound to betray himself since falling from Drogon. Nothing but the increasingly laborious rhythm of his breath. She strips away the layers in her way and doesn't flinch when she sees the extent of the wounds. She'd been ignoring the garish red of his blood against the white of her hands all this time. It'd prepared her. But she still has to swallow, to look away for a second, reaching for the linen, pretending her hand doesn't shake.

The gash of a blade in his stomach, a second one at his hip that twists nastily, too much blood spread across him, too much soaked into the garments, into the snow, into her skin, into Drogon's back. She'd held her fingers firm against it all as they'd rode, as if she could stem it. Feeling it seep through, a horrible warm contrast to the bite of icy air, her arms wrapped tightly around him to keep him on, pressing her body down into his as he collapsed over her child's neck…

"I'm not a healer," she says, the first thing she's said to him since finding him half dead already, surrounded by enemies. Men he'd protected from her. She bunches the linen and pushes it hard into his wounds, a little harder than she intends, ignoring his sharp intake. Upset by the futility, by the powerlessness choking her, she whispers, "I don't know what you need."

"I'm remembering the look on your face," is how he answers, confusing her. She frowns up at him, but his eyes have shut, pain tightening his too sallow face. Voice rougher now, weaker, trying to muster amusement, "Nobody's ever had such righteous fury on my behalf before."

"You saved me," she doesn't say. "You tended me when I was hurt, guarded me while I was vulnerable. I owe you my protection."

"Lord Snow," she does say. Stern, grim, calling for his focus.

He releases a shuddering breath and nods, trying to rouse. She doesn't like the way his chest and shoulders and torso jerk, or the grave acceptance in his eyes when they find hers, tired but intent. "Aye, alright. Start a fire."

Before she rises, she takes his hand, lays it over the linen, replacing her own. Works fast but precise. It's what she'd intended, but she'd hoped he would have other ideas. She's too aware of his gaze fixed on her spine as she builds the fire, stokes flame to life, her limbs stiff from cold and exhaustion and the still intense ache of her own injuries that've barely begun to heal. And her mind racing.

"Far be it from me to complain when the Mother of Dragons drops from the sky and saves my life,"
he rasps, making her go still.

"But?"

"But it could've gone better," he complains.

She turns her head to hide her smile. Lays the pot into the hearth to boil the snow into clean water. She comes back to him, digs out the small blade he says is in his boot, holds it over the flames until it heats enough. She takes a whole linen and throws it over the pallet in the corner. She finds a pile of furs in another cupboard, layers the pallet, so it'll be ready for him when she can lay him down. Then she looks around the room, the shack, just letting herself be at a loss for a weak moment. Wishing she had medicine, tools, food, anything.

"Where are we?"

He breaks her from the moment and she moves past it. Cocks an eyebrow at him before she realizes his eyes have shut again, head fallen back, hand barely holding to the linen. She makes her tone stay level, sound normal, "I've never been to this end of the world. You expect I should know?"

"Your dragon?" he asks.

"I don't know where he's gone. I don't know why he's left us." She's curt, but even so, it's much more than she'd ever normally reveal to someone. Returning to the fire, she dips linen strips into the hot water and rings them out. Back on her knees before him, she swipes carefully at his torso, clearing the mess of blood, cleaning the wounds while he bites his tongue, a harsh groan and other more guttural sounds vibrating at the back of his throat. Feeling sorry for him, a bit for herself too, she admits, "Punishing me perhaps."

"Punishing you?" comes from between gritted teeth.

"He's angry with me."

"I don't understand. You don't control him?"

"Dragons are not slaves," she responds, harsher than she means to. Softer now, she explains, "He listens to me because he loves me, because I'm his mother. There's always a choice."

He's quiet for a long while then, enduring while she works. He seems disturbed. When he finally finds words, he's very cautious with them. "That's … alarming." Terrifying, his face tells her.

"Drogon is not a monster," she says, getting defensive despite herself. She should control her tongue, but she has the inexplicable urge to make him understand, to keep him from thinking of her son what anyone else in the world would think. "He only hunts for food. The only time he's greatly destructive is when he's doing as I ask."

And in defending Drogon, she's just indicted herself, she realizes, watching his eyes change. Those dark expressive eyes that see too much, go too deep, and leave her feeling unnerved and wanting. Like she longs for something she can't name but at the same time bristles under an inspection that may find her measure up short. She watches him regard her in that way a smart man regards a beast he can't predict, something dangerous he hasn't yet figured out.

Without another word, she washes out the reddened strips and brings them back with the knife. With slow obvious motions, giving him time to brace or to stop her, she splays one palm to his ribcage and pushes with all her strength, helping him hold himself in place when she puts the flat of the blade to each stab wound and scalds the torn tissue. Cauterizing to cut off bleeding and infection.
Nothing shows on her face, but she wants to cry at the strangled noise she rips from him. The drawn out growl of agony, choking, the way his body bucks, strung so taut he could snap, knuckles cracking as he fights to keep still under her. His teeth grit so hard, she worries he might break his jaw. It takes everything in her to not flinch away. To press on. To finish what she needs to do.

It only takes a few moments really, despite how it feels. The worst of his reaction is even more fleeting, subsiding with a quaking sigh, his fingers wrapping around her wrist as she does the dressings. As she curses herself, and Drogon, and the situation she's found herself in, all the while her face is smooth. She has nothing to relieve his pain, she has nothing to help him heal, so she sears him, cleans him, wraps him best she can. It's all she can do for him. Whatever damage there is inside, it'll have to sort itself.

He'll either survive this or he won't.

She can't fix anything.

When she puts her arms around him and pulls him up, almost his entire weight bears down on her. He's half conscious, haggard, further waned than he'd allowed her to see before. She quivers for just a second, threatening to buckle, then stubbornness strengthens her knees, her arms, and she shuffles with him across the room. His broader body draped over her, his head falling to the edge of her throat, she feels how weak he's gotten, how cold he's grown, and struggles to push away her fear.

_I owe you my protection._

_I owe you._

_Please don't do this, whoever you are._

After she gets him down, she uses shaky hands to fumble with his attire, getting his boots off with a fight that nearly makes her crack. Then his belt, anything restrictive she finds, and she means to leave his leggings until she realizes they're wet and she shouldn't, so she strips him of those as well. She takes a clean linen and smoothes it slowly over him, carefully, thoroughly, along his collarbone, his shoulders, down his arms, up his legs, wiping him clean, drying him off, rubbing him warm. She uses the ministrations to soothe herself. To lose herself. Then she pulls the furs up over him and goes to the fire.

Staring into the brightness of it, rich bright against shadow, the crackling heat always a comfort to her. Her hands aren't shaking any longer, but the sight of them still twists her stomach. The look of the red, and the feel of his blood caking to her, crusting. Without thinking, she plunges them into the boiling water. Scraps them against each other. Lets it peel away everything that upsets her.

When she lifts them, she half expects the skin to be ruined. Expects agony.

She feels nothing.

Just the same hollow ache of hunger and fatigue.

She worries about Drogon, his seething emotions, his cryptic intentions, and his torn wing. She worries about her other two children at the mercy of whoever is control of her cities now. She worries about her friends, all so much more vulnerable than her dragons. She worries about her people, who have already suffered through so much, who have laid their faith and devotion in her, who she has failed. She worries about herself, weak and tired and healing too slowly, stranded in enemy land, _lost_. She worries about the man behind her. Worries about why she cares.

No. Not why she cares. That's reasonable, given what they've been through. No, she worries about
why that impulse is such a powerful one.

During the day, she wraps a fur around her shoulders and braves outside, searching for solutions. Reaching for Drogon, demanding he come back for her, too tired to be angry at his refusal. She tries focusing on her hunger while she's thinking of him, hoping to stoke some concern, but she's still ignored. Which means, depending how long she's stranded here, she'll need to fend for herself. For them. Hunting has never been a skill of hers, and she has no weapon for it, but the barren white as far as the eye can see and the deadened trees at the bottom of the hill let her know there won't be much luck in scavenging.

After dumping the soiled water, she refills the pot with clean snow and sets it back into the hearth to boil.

She could walk perhaps. If she wasn't wounded and so weak, she could brave the white wasteland and try to find civilization. Aside from the danger of being found out for who she is should she meet people here, she has no coin, no resources to barter with, and not a very good penchant for thievery. If there was something out there she could reach on foot…

And what of her Lord Commander? She can't just leave him, even if she did have the energy to expend on risking it.

There's no well that she can find around the shack, which leads her to believe there must be a water source nearby. A stream or a lake within the woods? Would it be frozen solid in this weather? If it wasn't, she'd likely find any sort of prey sturdy enough to survive the snow close.

She considers her problems and possible options while she searches for firewood supply, finds some but finds it not protected properly, rotted, useless. Frustration makes the weariness worse. She's tempted towards a meltdown, recent weeks building slowly upon her, threatening to break her over the smallest thing. She has to stop, standing out in the cold, wind burning at her face, injuries gnawing at her pain tolerance, and shut her eyes. Just breathe. Remind herself that this is nothing. She's walked through hells and come out the other side of each and every one of them. This is nothing.

But she is too tired, she realizes, to keep fighting right now. Everything seems so bleak and she feels so helpless, beaten, and pushing forward right now would only wear on her worse. Better to rest, to try again later.

Before she can settle for that, she at least has to get better bearings. She hikes carefully down the hillside, moving slowly, painstakingly, ventures into the treeline to explore what lurks. No obvious paths, not much life at all beyond the black birds that flutter between dead branches, but she walks for awhile, hoping for luck. She's sore and swaying and shivering hard by the time she backtracks, barely managing to climb the hill again. Hours have gone by yet the sun is still as pale as ever, the world still white and black and grey, nothing else.

The world has never felt to her so vast or desolate before.

Surrender deepens her misery. Though in the eerie silence of the trees, she had thought she might've heard the faint murmur of a brook. Perhaps when her head is clearer, she'll be able to recognize which direction to follow, and with a better plan in hand than hoping to fall upon some food.

If her damn incorrigible son would quit being so difficult…

Going back inside temporarily defeated, Daenerys bars the broken door and shakes free of the dusting powder. She strengthens the fire and untangles herself out of the less comfortable leathers,
leaving just the ragged scraps of woolen undergarments she woke up in at Hardhome. She scoops out a cup of burning water and drinks her fill, scoops another and sets it down to the floor near the bed to cool.

She'd tried to stay quiet to not disturb him, but when she looks at him now, she finds him watching her from under his lashes. It startles her into stillness for a moment, breath caught in her throat, fingers itching restlessly, frowning at his strange silent intensity. It's mostly just pain on his face, but she doesn't like the weight of his stare regardless. She lays the back of her hand to his brow, finds him too cold, so cold. It makes her feel better about giving into the bed's temptation.

Wordlessly, cautiously, she pulls her fur tighter around her and slides under the pile of the rest, laying down beside him. She minds to not jostle him, but her fingertips skim down his length, testing the chill that's set into him, and she sighs. Parting her fur just a little, very tentatively moving closer, touching her skin to his from top to bottom, willing to share the unusual warmth of her body. She may still be shivering from the brutal wind, but she knows what she feels like to him.

If she didn't, the sound he makes would tell her, a groan trapped in his throat, vaguely but immensely relieved, half aware as he is. Drowsy and embattled. It worries her. He worries her.

Perhaps that's why she digs her chin into the muscle of his shoulder and, in a fervent whisper, commands him, "You will not die, Lord Snow. You and I have many battles to fight yet. If you want my help with your Night King, you will not die."

He huffs out a morbid laugh. Croaks, "I'll try."
Chapter 3

The Hunter or The Prey

When he wakes, he's alone and shaking something awful. After some first few moments of wild senselessness, he pushes past the pain and gets his brain working again. Settles with the recollection of his circumstances. Delirious fragments sift back in, hazy awareness as he's rested, the hunger, the thirst, the unbearable pain, the heat of her skin against him soothing the aching cold. Grey daylight and silence, darkness and howling wind, wood rattling, creaking, the sound of her voice, softened and faraway, then very close, too close, all around him. Feverish dreams.

How many days has it been? What is he forgetting?

He tries to prop himself up, cringes away from that idea the second his stomach muscles start to clench, setting a chain reaction of screaming protest off. So, he's not moving yet. He looks around the shack, finds the fire almost died out, the door hanging half open. Dread sinks heavy onto him. Fear from not knowing. If he can't get up to shut himself in, he'll freeze to death before his wounds can take him.

If she deserted him here…

"Cold," the queen murmurs, teeth chattering as she falls through the door and shoves at it. Wind has blown her silver tresses crazily, bitten red into her cheeks under that too pale skin. "Who would ever choose to live in such a forsaken place?"

Jon chuckles, hand going to his middle under the furs, wincing. She spins to appraise him. Moves closer. A cup is at his lips before he looks up, looks into her eyes, savoring the warmth of her fingers over his brow. How she can be shivering and still feel like flame to him, he'll never understand.

"Your fever is gone," she murmurs, more to herself than him. "It will come back, no doubt, if we can't find sustenance." He takes the cup from her grasp, works on it with great effort, draining slowly, knowing he needs it but finding it hard to swallow. The knit of her brow makes him determined to ignore that. "There's a river near that hasn't wholly frozen, but I haven't seen anything moving out there yet but the birds. I've searched every inch of this lousy shack and found nothing to help. No food, no bow, no fishing rod, just a dull old sword and dried herbs." She turns her head from him, looking towards the white through the window, clearly troubled. "And Drogon…"

She must've gone out looking for her dragon again. "No sign?"

"He's injured," she says, erasing whatever vulnerability had slipped through her mask of efficiency. She refills the cup and cradles it in both hands in her lap when she sits down beside him. "He needs a safe place to rest while he recovers." Then she meets his gaze, and those striking blue eyes warm a little, taking him in, allowing just a touch of concern and sympathy and something soothing like a mother's instinct might've been, if he'd ever experienced that. "As do you."

"This is not a safe place for either of us, I suspect. Especially not for you. Word will spread of what you did at Hardhome." News normally takes a long while coming in and out at the Wall, but not something like that. "And if your dragon is flying about all over Westeros… They'll kill you, if they know you're here."
They. Could mean so many.

And who will kill him if they find him, he wonders. Who all has betrayed him? What is happening to the Night's Watch now that he's gone? To his brothers, to the wildlings? If he was able to be up and of health, what would he do? He has to go back, of course, doesn't he? But what would he be walking into?

"Don't worry about that, Jon Snow."

Her words break him from the abyss of all that. For a second, he thinks she's read his mind, then he realizes she means herself. The threat to her life, the danger she's in, stranded here with him, because she came back for him, because she saved him. Don't worry about that? Don't worry about her? That's not possible.

Not after what she's done. What she could do.

"If I'm in danger, Drogon will come. It's only that…" She falters, turning away again, licking her lips, trying to put it to words. "A dragon is strong. Self-sufficient. A dragon would never starve and go weak and expect someone to hunt for him. Drogon will stand between me and my enemies, but he doesn't understand the more nuanced struggles." Her mouth quirks then, an almost imperceptible curve at each corner, and he's surprised to find she's actually amused by that. Frustrated and worried and weary, but amused. "He expects me to solve my own problems." Then ruefully, "As he should. I just wish he'd be a little more cooperative about when and where he decides to leave me behind."

Jon doesn't quite know what to think about all this. This Dragon Queen and her odd relationship with that monumental beast.

In the brief time he's known her, he's seen the cool bloodthirst in her eyes, the raging fire restrained in the way she moves her body, the powerless distrust looking up at him, the refusal of fear, the fragile beginnings of belief, in him and what he was saying, the rise of focused command amidst chaos that would not be denied, the protective anger and the willingness to subside it for someone else's sake, the quiet anxiety for what is out of her control, for the limit to what she can fix, and now the deep care that speaks to him through every small act. And he knows, surely as he knows himself or Ghost to be genuine, that everything he has seen so far has been sincere. She has no reason to lie, to project something she's not, to manipulate, because it would be a waste of her time. He's no one, nothing that could matter to her or her machinations, and she must realize this.

The way she fought for him, the way she stayed and defended Hardhome when anyone else would have climbed onto that dragon and flown at the first sign of what was coming, he can imagine now why she was so upset that first night, talking about her cities, her freed slaves and their deposed masters. It had frightened him then, hearing her rage, dread sinking its claws into him at how murderous she seemed, this woman with so much ungodly power held in her hand. In that moment, she looked like someone willing to burn the world down when it angered her. To destroy anything, everything, if it stood in her way. But now he knows— He thinks— He believes that he understands. That bloodlust in her then was a product of the same protective instincts he'd seen burning in her when she'd touched down in the courtyard and put herself between him and his betrayers. That righteous fury, he thinks, remembering the awe he'd felt from it, an unexpected swell of amazement and disbelief and relief and strange gratitude shattering through the heartsick misery his men laid in him. And also, somewhere deep and dark and ignored, an intense thrill. Of something, he's not sure, can't name, but it was a powerful feeling.

People she feels kinship to, people she chooses to take as her own for whatever reasons might inspire her to do so, they are protected, he realizes. They are fought for. This exiled queen, this Daenerys
Targaryen, Mother of Dragons… It was just dumb luck that she'd landed in his lap, because that'd made him one of hers.

He's sure of that now, watching her boil and wring linens, pull the furs aside and unbind his dressings with delicate fingers. She cleans his wounds, gaze fixed on her work while he studies her face. She packs them with fresh dressings, then slides an arm under him slowly, flattens her palm between his shoulder blades, arching him just a few inches to wrap a thick band around his torso, tying a knot. She stays gentle, remote mostly, but the way her lush features flinch at the low noise in his throat he can't avoid leaves him biting back his pain a lot harder.

"That was Castle Black, wasn't it?" she says, once she's finished, covering him back up, hands smoothing over the furs in a reassuring tick. "And those men…"

Jon sighs. "Aye, they were mine."

She brings her hands back to her lap, clears her expression of anything but curiosity, shifting from her knees onto her hip where she'd settled on the floor. "Why would they betray you?"

"I brought thousands of wildlings past the Wall. I welcomed them onto our lands. It's never been done before." He adjusts incrementally, nothing but a hum escaping him at the fiery spike, staring at the roof. "They think it goes against the mission of the Night's Watch. They believe it's breaking our vows."

"They're cowards." The sharpness of her tone catches him off guard, after so much hushed tenderness. "To ignore what's coming for them, to want to condemn so many people to die that way, to ambush their Lord Commander in the middle of the night when he's unarmed and there's a dozen of them." Her wrathful disgust brings out a slight smile. It should frighten him. It should definitely sober him. Instead, he's … kindled. "Why would you protect them? Why did you stop me?"

"They're my men," he answers gravely. "It's my duty to— They're mine."

She can understand that, he'd guess. That possessiveness, that responsibility. To take care of them and to bring justice to them by his own hand when it is merited. When he's able. The mutiny is his problem, his failing, and he must solve it. Somehow. But to let her and her dragon wreak vengeance across Castle Black that night, he had no idea what that would look like. How bad that would get. And whatever they've done, he doesn't want his men burnt alive.

"The sun is setting," the queen says, when she finally decides to say something. "Hard to tell here. It goes grey to darker grey to black to grey again. How do you live in a place like this?" she wonders. Her hand had been holding her face, elbow on the furs, but she drops her arm now, half across him. He takes his eyes off her face to look at it, to linger over the urge to pull his hand from under the furs and touch her. "How do you live a life lacking in so much color?"

"It's not always this way," he murmurs. "There's green, so much green over the rolling hills. And red, all sorts of shades of it, falling from the trees. The sky is like your eyes, bright blue, not grey. There are colors here, Your Grace, I promise."

"Daenerys. My name is Daenerys."

"I know your name."

"Then use it," she commands, turning to him with a fine arch of one eyebrow.

His smile is tight with distress but it is honest. "Daenerys." Then he tells her, "Winter has come. And, aye, it's brutal, but it's not all there is. It's not all there ever will be. I pray. I don't know that,
his traitorous head reminds him. *I don't know, but I hope.*

She looks back to the window, conflict in her expression, unhappiness. "I don't have it in me to go out again today."

"Nor should you."

"I will try again tomorrow." She's speaking to herself, resolving herself, but it makes him want to take her hand again, to tug at her, force her to look at him. To forget about what lies out there, forget the hunger that gnaws at them both and the knowledge that she can't change it.

She's been bound, beaten, whipped, shot with arrows, run through, and flown halfway across the world then did battle with an undead army. Now she's taking care of him. He took two daggers to the stomach, that's all, and he can't even get to his feet. He should be guarding her. Hunting for her. Changing *her* dressings. Instead, he's … useless. A burden. *She really is a dragon, isn't she? And what am I?*

"I don't mind sharing," is all he says, encouraging her closer, validating her obvious need for rest. She gives him a kind smile. Where it lies over him, her hand strokes across his chest through the furs. Firms at his shoulder in some kind of message. But for the longest while, she doesn't move. She stays on the floor, staring out the window, nothing but the sounds of the white winds and the dwindling fire lulling him under. And her breath, slow and steady, reassuring.

*I'm here,* he imagines that means. *I'll keep you safe. I won't leave you.*

In the darkness, he half rouses when her body slides down to his beneath the furs once more, the sudden heat, the sudden softness of her skin startling him out of his muddled nightmares. "Shh," she sighs, soothes, wraps herself very tentatively around him. A soft warm body against his that reminds him there are things that exist in this world beyond the pain. Good things, enjoyable things, things worth fighting for.

Worth living for.

"You burn," he whispers, not really awake, wanting to kiss her.

Wanting to kiss her.

That wakes him up.

It's an urge that is just there. A thought that slips in like it's always been, like it belongs, and it's only after a moment of turning it over that it jars him, that he remembers it's not something that should be. It startles him, the way he'd unconsciously accepted its arrival, the way it apparently hadn't startled him at all.

"Sleep, Jon Snow," she commands, as if she feels his thoughts. Buries her head under his chin so he's not as tempted.

+ 

Half the day is gone before she spots the hare.

She's been sitting for too many hours, back propped on a dead tree, knees up to her chest, huddled and shivering in an inadequate fur. Being quiet, being part of the woods, just waiting. Now that she sees it, she's too stiff to move for a hard moment. It feels as if Jon's dagger has frozen to her hand, supposedly at the ready to strike. It's sheer force of will that gets her up.
She's starving. Each day that passes, her body gets weaker, burns worse, and the cold begins to hurt her more. The Lord Commander is in even worse shape. He needs food more. He needs … help. She can't give him that. She knows nothing about his injuries or the state he's in or what those cowards damaged inside. She got lucky. The sword that skewered her was a thin thing and she'd twisted to the side from it, so mostly it got flesh. But Jon Snow's wounds… The one at the hip doesn't seem so bad. It's the other one she's worried about.

She's gone longer without food. This is nothing to crossing the Red Waste. At least there's water here, and rest, and shelter. But she also hadn't been healing then. And then, like many times before, others had depended on her, and they had died for it. For her failure. Her incompetence. It's not going to happen again. Not like this.

Men will die in battle for her, because it's not for her. She's just the symbol, the sigil, the provoker. What they're fighting for is a better world. For them, for their families, for those that come after, even if they don't know it. That's understandable. She can live with that.

But not like this.

Daenerys lunges, landing hard in the snow at the riverbank, blade sinking in, clashing off stone beneath. Missing the hare by an inch when it leaps. She starts to throw herself after it, ready to reach and scabble and give everything to catch hold before it's gone. But she jerks short, cries out instead, dropping back to her knees. She hunches, hangs her head, holds her side, seeing the blood seep between her fingers. Her wound has ripped open again.

Frustration makes tears slip from her eyes, like sharp ice on her cheeks. She wants to scream. She wants to hit something. A humorless laugh escapes her instead.

Perhaps it's that the fur fell away when she moved, that she blends in with the snow better now, her pale skin, her silver hair, not much leather left to clad her, part burned away, part abandoned. Or perhaps some god has finally taken pity on her, she thinks wryly. Whatever it is, Daenerys feels her spine prick, and when she lifts her head, through the blur of tears, she sees a black stag.

Perhaps the fur, too much like a predator, was scaring the prey away.

Entranced, she comes to her feet as it bends to the water. She takes a careful step, waits, then another when it doesn't mind her. Her eyes linger on the antlers, the deadly tips, the muscle of the animal's body, those hooves. It might be prey to a hundred things in these woods, but it could easily carve through her on her best day, never mind today.

She's desperate enough to risk it. She must be out of her mind.

On her third step, blood on one hand, dagger in the other, Daenerys coils to spring when a sudden swirl crashes into the stag from above. A blur of white fur and massive body coming down on them, having leapt from a rock ledge on the higher side of the river. She falls away with a gasp, landing on her backside, scrabbling backward. It takes the stag with the first hit, teeth in flesh, paw pushing at the underside of an antler, forcing the points to turn as it pins it down. Snaps the stag's neck with a sickening crunch and a snarl.

Wolf, she thinks wildly, getting a better look as it lands, body going still, teeth rending at the dead stag's throat. It's a wolf. She's never seen one before. For some reason, she hadn't imagined they'd be so big. So…

Run, something in her brain screams. A stronger part, a louder part, keeps her in her place. Run and you make it chase you, fool. Don't make it chase you.

It might be too interested in its kill. It might not even notice her. It might just—

The beast turns, pins her with bright red eyes, white fur gone red, splattered from the jowl to the broad chest. Air catches in her throat. In the clutches of panic, it takes everything to hold together when the beast stalks towards her, head stretched low, those disturbing eyes never wavering. Burning through her. Moving slowly, barely daring to breathe, she lowers herself flat to the snow, knuckling the dagger painfully at her side, pressed to her thigh. Laying herself helpless on some pure wild instinct, exposing her belly, leaving herself at the thing's mercy.

She knows animals. She's got some animal in her. She listens to the instinct.

But she's terrified. More viscerally so than she's been in a very long time. She has no idea what it will do.

Her empty hand shifts just slightly in the snow, wrist turning her palm up, forcing her fingers slack in supplication. It's over her now, above her, paws on either side of her legs as it towers. She doesn't remember the blood on her palm and that turning it up was probably an idiotic idea until the wet shove of its bloody snout startles her. A hot tongue lashes, making her fingers flex, tasting her.

She tightens her already hurting grip on the dagger's hilt. Imagines twisting it just so, thrusting it up into the softness of the beast's throat, unprotected where it stands encompassing her. Can she get the blade up before those reddened fangs rip her open? The uncertainty debilitates her. She tries to push herself to action. She knows if she waits much longer, it'll be too late.

But the wolf moves before she can unfreeze. It trails its nose across her stomach, snuffing at the bleeding wound, and downwards. Over her groin, between her thighs, along the line of a bare shin. She shudders at the dangerous caress, knowing she's missed her window. If she tries to sit up and swing now, it'll rip her face off. Snap her neck as easily as that stag's. She wasted her one chance and now…

A growl rumbles in the beast's chest.

It backs away, shoots her a strange look, then returns to its kill.

She expects it to maul the thing, to be busy chewing in, and she'll push herself up and get the hell out of here before it changes its mind. But it doesn't eat at the stag. It hooks its teeth back in the neck and yanks, throwing its head, swinging the carcass over its shoulder so the stag curves across its back, hangs there. Daenerys watches dazedly as it starts forward up the path she's worn into the snow. The path up the hillside.

The white wolf is almost to the end of the trees when it looks back at her and rumbles again. And she thinks… She thinks she understands?

The woman climbs to her feet and reclaims her fur, wrapping it tight, still clinging to the ineffectual dagger for comfort. She follows after the wolf, guessing it must be guided by her scent trail. No earthly idea why. When she weakens, wavers, half collapsing on the hillside when the climb gets to be too much, out of breath and still bleeding, it doesn't leave her. She clutches at the snow, panting, shaking, wanting to just lie down and rest, doubting she can go on. The wolf turns its head again, bares its teeth, growls down at her. Urging her upwards, she knows. She knows…

"Yes, alright," Daenerys grits out, annoyed, resentful. Pushes herself back to her feet and keeps
climbing.

She crests the peak by pure spite. And not a little curiosity.

At the shack, it drops its shoulder and heaves, dumping the stag into the snow. It goes forward immediately then, and she jerks after it, worried she might need to fight it off after all, worried about the Lord Commander. But the wolf knocks its way through the door and she gets stuck at the threshold, staring in wonder when it rushes to the bedridden man, slinking low, shoving its head up under his chin, ears pricked down, a puppy whine in its throat.

It smears blood across his skin.

He stirs, brow furrowed, eyes struggling to open. His hand comes up blind. Fingers sink deeply into the beast's fur and clench the second he feels it. Holding tight. Familiarly. His whole body seems to loosen in relief.

Seeing the affect it has on him, her whole body relaxes too. The fear finally fades.

"Ghost," he laughs, hoarse but happy. She's never heard that from him before. "Should've known you'd find me."

"I take it you two know each other then?" she drawls archly, coming inside. At his look when he turns to her, the warmth there, the new brightness in his eyes, some knot inside her unwinds, spreading through her limbs like liquid comfort. She smiles back, unable to prevent it, then bars the door behind her. She has a grisly task in front of her, knowing she'll have to go back out and dress the stag, but the cold will keep it from spoiling too quick, and she has to take care of herself first. "Your Ghost gave me a few extremely unpleasant moments down by the river, I'll have you know."

The man frowns, scrubs his fingers under the wolf's jaw, tells him, "This better not be her blood, boy." Serious, chiding, but not like he really thinks it could be.

"He brought dinner for the next week at least, so I won't hold a grudge."

Jon laughs again. It's just a huff of air really, but the feeling behind it keeps the smile on her lips through the pain as she strips off her binding and cleans her wound up, standing by the fire, her back to him. She tries to be quick, wanting it done, rather he not notice, but of course he does. She can hear the frown return from his tone when he asks, "You're hurt?"

A tight sound in his throat makes her turn, sees him pushed up on his elbows, a lot more pain creasing his face than her reopened wound causes her. Irritation flares, and then humor when the wolf bumps his nose into Jon's temple, forcing him flat again. She makes a note to give the animal the good bits of the stag.

"I moved wrong," she dismisses, reties her binding once she's got it packed to stop the bleeding. Pulls a baggy linen tunic over her head and replaces the fur. "You didn't mention you were friends with a..."

"Direwolf," he supplies. "Found him when he was just a pup. He's been with me ever since, when we can help it."

"Jon Snow," she murmurs, coming to sit beside them, only mildly uneasy to be so near the beast now. She's got a warm wet rag in her hand, but waits for the wolf to lift its head from its master's chest before she swipes it across his bare skin, on the arched bow of his collarbone, on his throat as the male jut quivers, washing away the red. She pretends to be oblivious to the way his gaze lays heavy on her, darkening, intensifying, his hand still sunk into the wolf's thick pelt beside them.
"You're full of surprises."
It's So Powerful

The first few days having food again are very good ones. Very good. Such a simple thing to make them so happy. She devours meat with no grace, grease on her fingers, on her face, desperate for it once it touches her tongue, the dam she'd held back by self-control shattering, the hunger so ferocious. But she keeps the Lord Commander on strictly broth from it for awhile. She tries to be sympathetic as he grumbles behind them, as she and the animal tear happily at their pieces by the fire. More than once, his wolf nuzzles up to her. He'll flatten himself to the floor and scoot closer and thrust his nose up under her thigh, tickling her, making her laugh, and she'll slide him away with both hands in his flank and a strong heave. But she gives in, pulling shreds off her chunks, tossing them into the air for the wolf to snatch at. Such a simple thing in the face of so many dire problems, such a simple thing.

Once Jon can stomach the meat itself, they're all a little happier.

He's sitting up more. He can manage on his feet for longer each try. He's dealing with his own dressings now.

When her back begins to bother her, he catches his thumbs at the hem of her tunic and skims it up, takes the boiled scraps she offers and cleans carefully at the lashes cut across her skin, just barely beginning to scab. She's been ripping them too much with all the exertion.

They're sitting by the fire. She turns her head over her shoulder when she thinks he's done, but he hasn't dropped the tunic, and finds him just staring at the marks now. No, not staring. Scowling. Gone away from her and Ghost, from this room, lost somewhere in his head. She reaches back and catches his wrist, bringing it down, covering herself.

"Do you always do this much brooding?"

He cracks a half smile, eyes clearing, focusing on her. "I'd like to say these are special circumstances, but…"

"Yes, I thought so," Daenerys replies, melodic with her humor.

And on the seventh night, she finally feels well enough, relaxed enough, to want to tackle the briar her hair has become. She sits on the floor, legs crossed, back propped by the edge of the bed, combing her fingers through it. Struggling, grimacing, taking two hands and ripping apart strands out of the worst knots.

He's watching her from under the furs, his wolf's huge warm body splayed over his legs, taking up nearly the whole bed. In shadow and firelight, she glances at him regularly over her shoulder while she works, liking the look of his face, lazy and hazy and a small forgotten smile at the edges of his lips.

It's the feeling that swept in on the wake of relief that does it, once they had food and warmth and both began healing better, as the unspoken despair ebbed with the hunger. That feeling of inexplicable contentment stretches through the shack, wrapping around them, arcing between them. It's unwarranted, unsafe, falling into it. It's a false sense of hope or security or that everything's fine.
They both still know that *nothing* is fine. Everything is wrong and they have no idea what they're doing or where to go from here. But the feeling persists.

"C'mere," he grunts after awhile, making her shimmy up the line of the bed, until his fingers sink into her disastrous hair like they sink so easily into Ghost's pelt.

They work together then, hands crossing as they tackle the absent task in silence, excepting the occasional hum or gasp of complaint and his chuckled *sorry*. Eventually, her own drift away, falling into her lap, her eyes slipping closed, and it's just his hands in her hair. Braiding through her tresses, loosely, messily. His knuckles brush her shoulders, bared by the haggard drape of the tunic, a cold touch ever so often that goes into her whole body with strange frissons of imagination. Of *craving*.

"Jon," she sighs.

Kneading the nape of her neck, braids half tied, he seems to have wandered off again. He does that often, leaves her behind in favor of whatever misery awaits him inside his mind. She knows some of what he thinks of now, having spent days bundled and bedridden, spent too much time talking, but she has no patience for it regardless. After all, doesn't she have more than her fair share of miserable memories she could unlock if she wanted? And more than enough troubles in the present to torture herself with, but she refuses to let them in, not when she has no power to change it yet and all it could do is wear on her.

But she is oddly glad to have gleamed insight. He's not much for words, her Lord Commander, so she appreciates being able to coax him into giving her that much. Talking all day of their pasts, of their differing worlds, getting to know one another. They took turns painting pictures of what they'd experienced so far, what their lives had been like, hers on one end of the earth, his on the other.

Winterfell and his family, the Night's Watch and his time Beyond the Wall, what the roughneck North and its major Houses are really like. Most of his happier stories involve Arya, she's found, and she wants to meet the little girl he describes. She knows she most likely doesn't exist anymore, one way or the next.

Listening to him speak of *home* left her sad. Not for the sake of his sadness but for the old happiness that lingered underneath. It left her pitying herself, wishing she'd ever had something like that. Home, family, people that loved her and made her feel safe and would defend her like Jon would defend Arya, or Sansa, or his brothers, or even the woman that was not his mother and made him feel unwelcome and ashamed through his childhood. People that would never dream to terrorize her, torment her, make her feel small and violated and afraid, then sell her off to the highest bidder. A place like a fortress that she belonged in, where no assassin could chase her off, where she would never go hungry or have to sleep in the streets in the rain.

For a moment, the barest moment, her eyes had fallen shut and his voice had wrapped around her and she'd…

She let herself imagine things. A dream of a future of possibilities that will never come. Home, surrounded by sunshine and green, maybe at the edge of a beautiful sea. Flowers around her, so much color and warmth, and the chiming laughter of a child rolling in the grass. Maybe a beautiful man that would walk up behind her and slip his arms around her middle as they watched the child play. Somebody to love fiercely, who could love her in return. Not the queen, not the power, not the beauty, just Dany. And that child that would fill up her heart, that she would die for, that she would protect and cherish and build a better world for.

A real child, not a dragon that she loves with all her heart, struggles to hold onto, but could never truly connect with, truly understand, truly *trust*. Not a dragon she can't quite feel loved by, however
hard she pretends otherwise.

It's a glimmering fantasy of peace, quiet life, love and simple joy.

It hurts. It hurts so suddenly and so sharply, remembering it now again, that she wrenches her eyes open and those emotions back into their box and pulls herself from his touch. She swivels on the floor to face him, her face blank.

"What are you thinking about?"

"Where we will go," he says, blinking free of the haze. "When we're able to travel."

"We?"

"I have to return to Castle Black, but I don't know what I'll be going back to. I don't want to take you with me when I don't know that you'll be safe there."

"Drogon will come back for me. He just needs time."

"How much time, Daenerys? I'm not leaving you here on your own."

"I can't predict him anymore," she admits, doesn't permit the distress to surface. "He'll come for me when he's ready. Why are you so anxious to rush back to a brotherhood that tried to kill you?"

"I'll not forsake my vows just because they have. Why are you determined to return to a viper's pit that wants you dead when you don't even know if your allies are still alive?" he challenges.

"My dragons are at the mercy of Meereen. I must reclaim them, as I must reclaim the bay. I will not let all those people I freed slip back into chains. Real people, real lives, very real suffering. What waits for you at Castle Black besides traitors and ice?"

"I am the shield that guards against the Long Night. You've seen what's out there. You've seen what's coming. You honestly think I should abandon my post?"

"I never said that."

There are many ways to wage war.

"Daenerys," he implores, not understanding her.

"I'm tired," she says thickly, avoiding the graze of his reaching fingers, avoiding the pry of that penetrating gaze.

Jon's features shutter at her discomfort, her frost, whatever unguarded ease he'd allowed himself disappearing so quick it stabs regret into her. He drops his eyes, clears his throat, not able to get rid of that heady rasp when he orders, "You have to get down, boy. Her Grace needs the bed."

His knee lifts, gently jostling the wolf awake. His fingers slide through his fur as Ghost goes. His big body brushes against her, circles her, before he situates himself in front of the hearth. She's left staring at the sliver of space beside Jon waiting for her, feeling stiff in a way she hasn't before here.

"Dany," he breathes, after a long awful moment, so softly she hardly hears it. There's a little bit of forgiveness or apology or truce in him now, a willingness to table whatever just went wrong between them. "Just come to bed."

It shouldn't be so easy to set aside the roil of unpleasantness that'd stirred up in her somehow, vivid
but vague, incapable of explaining it to herself or untangling the strands of it and examining each aspect. She knows she confused him. She knows he didn't understand her. But did she? That drive that kicked up in her, does she know what specifically it's pushing her for? It's just … instinct. A half formed impulse that will grow into a determined idea soon. Either way, it shouldn't be so easy for her to lay down beside him, against him, and have all that disquiet just fall away.

She shouldn't be so tangled up in him. It's dangerous.

_Drogon has brought me to you twice now, _she thinks. _What is so special about you, Jon Snow? What does he want me to do with you?_


The thirteenth night, he dreams of her waking him up with her mouth. Licking into his own, the weight of her body sliding gently on top of him, moving over him. The warm press of her soft lips across his chest, his throat, the edge of his jaw, nosing at him. The squeeze of thick thighs on his hips as she straddles him, her fingers splaying strong on his shoulders, riding him.

Slow and sure, stoking aching pleasure.

He knows he's dreaming because the pain is gone. Her hair falls over one of her beautiful shoulders, edges sweeping across his stomach. In the darkness and flickering firelight, it's otherworldly silver, then it's flaming red gold, before it's silver again. His heart hurts for reasons he won't put names to but understands in his bones. He pretends not to notice the wavering, the altering, and runs his fingertips up the dip of her spine, makes her arch, hips rolling, taking him deeper. He strains up, striving for her mouth. Her head falls back, lips parted, gasping, and all he gets is her throat.

The longing is such an awful thing he's ignored for so long. It's surging now, demanding to be felt, demanding action. _Change._ Wanting to be sated.

To love a ghost is a tiring thing.

To lock away the reckless want of the woman in his arms is wearing on him hard. The very real, very alive, just unbelievable woman in front of him.

He keeps fighting, surely will die in this war he's taken on, but he feels like a dead man already. Empty, cold, incapable of being provoked or inspired. He's willing to fight because he's sworn himself to it, because it's all he knows, but he doesn't _feel it_, what he's fighting for. _He doesn't feel it._

Then she touches him and her heat sears down to the icy bone and that lost thing deep inside him starts to stir. She's fire made flesh and a part of him knows she could revive him, if she chose, if he asked.

He'll never ask.


_Ghost is hunting_, is the first thing she thinks when she turns and sees the man on his horse coming over the hill. Ghost has gone searching for prey, and she knows he'll have to go far to find it, not much life left in this frozen wasteland. And Jon Snow… Jon Snow was gutted barely a moon ago. He can't help her.

The man had already seen her, knew what he was coming for when he aimed himself this direction, she realizes, seeing no surprise in his face or hitch in the pace of his mount. She's in trouble. She didn't even bring Jon's dagger with her. He's big, an intimidating bulk even beneath his coat, broad
and bearded, scarred across the brow. She doesn't like the way his eyes rake her, doesn't like that smile, has seen the look too many times.

She knows what's coming before he dismounts. "Pretty girl. Long way from the road. You live out here all alone?"

"My family is inside," she lies, feet taking her anxiously backward before she berates herself, stands her ground.

He glances past her at the shack, peers down at her in dismissal, looking her over again. Grinning. Stepping in. "Awfully cold, girl. Could use a warm body for the night. For the next too. It's a nice surprise, coming across you, ain't it? Maybe I'll take you with me when I go tomorrow." And he reaches for her.

"You will not touch me," she commands fiercely.

He laughs. Grabs onto her, fingers lancing pain into her shoulder, thumb pushing at her throat. His other hand slides low between the fur. She bares her teeth, wishing for a weapon, debating herself on whether to try to fight or to let him do as he likes until she can wrest the upper hand. The indecision is short lived, because her body reacts the second he tightens on her breast. Her knee lifts, her heel slams down into his cap at an angle, forcing the leg out wrong. Her elbow arcs across his nose when he bends at the blow. She tries to twist out of the bruising hand at her neck, but he backhands her out of it instead.

With a yelp, Daenerys spins, hits the snow facedown. She rolls, scrambles to backpedal as he curses and spits blood, drawing the knife at his belt. Can she get up and run? Can she make it into the shack before he catches her? She'll have to. Where did she leave the dagger?

"Whore," he complains, cracking his dented nose. Then returns his focus to her with harsher intentions.

She's on her feet again but doesn't have the chance to spin before he's rammed into from the side, freezing her in place. Jon tackles the bigger man to the ground, shoulder to the ribs, coming out of nowhere. He bears him down and twists his wrist in both hands, turns his own knife against him, shoving it down through his throat as they land with a wild noise. Yell, growl, grunt, something, strangled and visceral, she can't describe it. Something angry and animal.

It takes him a moment to roll off, covered in blood, splattered across the face. He didn't move as the stranger died. Just held the knife in. Watched it happen, breathing in hard heaves, shaking with rage and violence. Once he's on his back in the snow, eyes screwed shut, scrubbing a hand up and down his bloodied face, she manages to move herself. Ventures forward. She's not afraid of him, but she's … trembling.

"Quite the pair," is all she says, grousing, grabbing onto him. She hefts him up against her, pushing away her emotions. He worsened his wounds, she can tell, but she doesn't berate him or thank him. They struggle together back to the shack. They don't talk about it. She gets him settled, washes the blood from his face without comment, before she goes back out to burn the body.

The horse was used to violence. It didn't run. It waited, milling around the hilltop, so she secured it to the shack before she lit the pyre. And later, wrapping a linen over her head to hide her hair, she mounts and urges it to backtrack, wanting to trace the path he'd taken here before the wind blows the tracks away. It's near dusk by the time she finally reaches the road, so she returns, intending to take
the road in the morning, hoping to find a useful province.

The Lord Commander doesn't like it. He tries to convince her to stay. Tries to insist he'll go instead. She almost holds onto her patience, but he wears her thin. Neither goes to bed in a good mood.

It's by far not the first night she's wished their predicament didn't require such close quarters. It doesn't feel like it, not here, but she's a queen and he's Lord Commander of the Night's Watch and there should be formality and an appropriate distance between them. They should be polite allies, perhaps a mild type of friends. It could prove a problem, after this is over, just how freely they've become with each other, how freely they speak, how freely they touch. It shouldn't be. It wouldn't be if not for the forced familiarity of lying together every night, and half the days, forced to rely on each other in a way that's quickly knocked down most of their respective defenses. There's been not much luxury for propriety.

Guilt twinges when she slips out from under the furs before he wakes.

All she finds is a tavern and a boarded up outpost. She barters the barkeep for a few supplies with the necklace she'd been wearing when she left Meereen. Subtly tries to get a better idea of where she is and what's within riding distance. Nothing is. They're in the middle of nowhere, too far out to safely travel without better supplies than she can get her hands on. But at least she comes back with a remedy brew.

He's pacing the length of the shack. Prowling like his wolf. Which is funny because Ghost is perfectly relaxed, chin on his crossed paws by the fire.

She doesn't apologize for worrying him. Just cocks a haughty eyebrow and makes him swallow his grievances. And the draught too, figuring better late than never, better something than nothing. Then she takes the pie out of the sack and slides it across the table at him. The look in his eyes lets her know he understands.

Daenerys wakes up to him staring down at her in the dark.

He's on one elbow, grazing the back of one knuckle down her cheek, where the brute from before left a sprawling bruise. He's severe, troubled, and she wants that look gone off his face. But she's afraid of getting caught up in it, in him, so she keeps her lashes hooded and her limbs slack and soft against him. A murmur of protest thrums in her throat as he disturbs the swelling. She turns her face into the linen underneath her, worms closer like his wolf would, burying herself.

Pretends to be seeking him in her sleep to get away from the chill, just as she's done a dozen times before.

*It doesn't matter,* she wants to tell him. *It means nothing.*

She asks more of the northern Houses, the politics between them, the numbers each have left and which direction they're likely to lend them. Then she asks about his family again. She asks about his family often now, since he told her the first story. He doesn't mean to, he feels like he shouldn't, but words fall out of his mouth and he savors the way remembering makes him feel. It's been so long since he's had cause to speak aloud of them. As much as it aches, it soothes too. Maybe she knows and it's kindness, or just boredom, or maybe she really is interested.
"And his wildling…"

"There's someone you love out there?" she asks.

Gruffer than usual, he answers, "Someone I love, yes. Out there, no."

He can't find his voice after that.

There are no words. Not the ones he's ready for.

+ "There's something you should know about me, Jon Snow."

"Oh?"

"My dreams come true," she whispers, stroking soft fingertips lightly over his bare chest, her cheek on his shoulder, the slide of one wonderful leg between his thighs. Her eyes are bright in the dark.

"I hope you have good dreams."

"I dream of fire. Cities burnt. And snow, falling, covering everything. A stillness." Her matter of fact way mixes with the sleepy intimate cadence of her voice and tries to lull him, but her words sink dread into his bones. Then she says, "When I was a child, I dreamed of a great white wolf," and his breath catches. "It was always waiting for me, waiting at the Iron Throne. Whenever I reached for the wolf, I would wake."

Jon lays his hand between her shoulder blades, silver locks between his fingers, her skin so hot. He doesn't breathe easy again until she's asleep.

+ It was foolish to venture out. It was foolish to give that barkeep such a rich necklace. Of course he would think she had more to offer. Of course he would come after her. How could she be so stupid?

Luck is all it is, that she happens to be out, orange on the horizon, when the riders crest the faraway peak and she gets a glimpse of the five of them before the next rise cuts them from view. Heart hammering in her throat, she's paralyzed for only a second before she moves back inside, controlled, precise, shoving down the panic. Drogon isn't near enough to defend her. Jon can't fight off five armed thugs. She has to think. She needs a—

Her eyes find the canister on the windowsill.

Yes. Yes, that will do quite well.

But Jon…

He's not good at taking orders. There's no time to explain, and he'll want to defend her, but lying will only ruin their one chance.

"There are five riders coming this way," she tells him, moving fast as she gathers everything she can into the sack. He stands from the chair he'd put before the fire, watches her intently, his expression ever darkening. But she remains decisive. "They think I'm worth robbing. Among other things, I'm sure. We don't have much time."

When she gets it all, she brings herself into his space, toe to toe, and hooks the sack onto his
shoulder. She makes him take the old sword. Then she rips a few layers of fur off the bed and throws them around him.

"You said riders. We can't outrun riders, especially not in this weather."

"We're not outrunning anything," she says calmly. She keeps her gaze on her hands where they pull at the edges of the furs at his chest, doesn't want to meet his. "You and Ghost are going to get down the hillside before they see you and wait for me by the river."

"That's not happening," he argues, northern burr gone even more gravelly. Anger puts steel in his eyes, *anger at her.*

"Have faith in me, my lord," she retorts, forcibly light. Pulling him, pushing him, positioning him. He lets her get him into the doorway before he stops her. She snaps, lets the fierceness out. "We can't run. We can't fight them. I will take care of this, I *can* take care of this, but only if you do as I say and move now."

"Daenerys."

"Jon. Go. That's a command."

"You're not my queen."

"No?" she counters archly. Dangerously. But the steel is unwavering, that visceral edge she'd seen in him as he shoved the knife into that man's neck, and she imagines if he really were a wolf, he'd be snapping his teeth. She imagines he and Ghost would rather stay and die, sinking their fangs into soft throats before they do. So she sighs, brings up the urgency and desperation into her face, and pleads, "*Trust me.* Jon, trust me and go. Go now. Please."

Whatever he sees in her eyes breaks him down. He surrenders, hating himself for it, she can see, but he surrenders and goes. The wolf brushes his flank along her hip as he passes, following his master down the incline.

She wants to watch them go the whole way, pray they fold into the treeline before the riders spot them, but she can't afford to. She snatches up the canister, pours the pitch she took from the tavern all over the shack, floors and walls. Quick but careful, she wraps the torch they've been using outside and sets it in the hearth. She drags the chair to the other side, so the fire stands between her and the door. Then she sits. She waits.

Thinking that she'll need to find a way to teach her Lord Commander how to obey when she commands, if this alliance of theirs is going to survive. She doesn't intend to let begging him become a habit.

When the barkeep and his comrades arrive, she offers a smile. Lets them all come inside before she grips the torchwood. They spread out, ransacking the place, looking for her treasures. Dismissive of her, the small woman with a stupid smile on her face, unarmed. She entertains them, easing around to the gaping doorway. It's only when they think she's trying to run that one grabs her wrist, yanking her against him. His arm bars across her throat, pinning her, making it hard to breathe.

Daenerys taps the torch to the ground. Everything alights.

+ 

Drogon comes back when he feels her fear.
She'd come out of the burning ruins, naked, reeking of smoke. Jon was there, not at the river where he should've been, shucking a fur, covering her with it. Clothing and boots out of the sack, and then they knew they had to go. Anyone or anything could be drawn by the fire.

They've trekked all night through the wooded hills, on foot since the flames scattered the horses, and daybreak tints the sky when she catches a glimpse of his massive body between the treetops, passing over, circling. When they come to a clearing, he drops down with a heavy huff, regards them with those inscrutable gold eyes. She feels his irritation and her anger riles in response. He's bewildering her recently. What does he have to be bothered about? He's the one causing her all sorts of trouble.

"Are you ready to behave yet?" she demands.

The dragon bristles.

Daenerys has to center herself. Patience. She cools the temper, sends her love and her gratitude for his protection across their tether, sends him her worry, the need to get back to his brothers, the necessity to take Jon Snow home first, and the concern for her son. It's the last sentiment that gets him setting himself down, offering her his wing, stretched out, arced over her, encouraging the woman to run her hands along him, checking the progress of his healing. It's almost completely scarred over. Relief fills her, and she emphasizes it, stokes it stronger, making it fill him too. Making sure he knows how much she cares, however strained things get between them. Because she's come to realize trying to dominate Drogon is a mistake. He's too defiant for that. He's too much like his mother.

He responds best to a softer touch.

Once she feels his willingness, his welcome, she turns to Jon. Grins a little. "Are you up for flying the rest of the way?"

"He'll let me ride him?" He's obviously wary, perhaps terrified beneath that stern reserve, but she doubts it'll deter him.

"With me," Daenerys assures. Warmly, because the way he looks at Drogon pleases her. She wraps her fingers around his wrist to make him follow when she steps up the spines of his wing. It's only once they're both settled at the base of his neck that the problem occurs to her. "Ghost," she sighs, looking back at the white wolf.

"He's alright. He'll find his way back. He always does."

"Good thing," she muses, "because I think a wolf riding a dragon might be too much to ask for."

And then, weirdly, Jon blushes, head turning from her. He clears his throat and tells Ghost to make for Castle Black. His arms don't come around her until the dragon shoves off the ground, wings expanding, and almost bucks the man. He holds to her tight, and she grips the thick horns to steady them, urging her son into the dawning sky.

+  

_In my dreams_, she thinks, even as the insinuation scares her, Jon's heart beating so hard against the spot between her shoulder blades, _I always reached for the wolf. Not the throne._
"We're flying south!" he shouts over the roar of the wind, molded to her back, mouth near her ear. They're so high, it's hard to see the ground, so it takes him longer than it should to recognize this. The air up here is odd, thin, hard to breathe in. His wounds are aching. He doesn't know how much longer he can stay stiff like this against the swerve and pound. "Daenerys!"

"I know," she says grimly. She's turned to one shoulder, letting him see the expression on her face, the one she only gets when her dragon is defying her, troubling her. "He won't go north."

Jon tries to not get mad. Or panic. "Where is he taking us?"

"Safety, I think. Whatever that is to him."

"He thinks the south is safe for you?!"

She takes one hand off the horn, smooths it over his knuckles where he's got them clenched low on her stomach. She doesn't say anything, but the touch is enough. She hooks her thumb into his palm and just grips it.

He leaves them in a cave. Soars over bright beautiful scenery then swoops low, landing at the narrow outcropping that overlooks a summer valley, slithering into the mouth of the massive cavern cut into a sloping cliff before he lets them off his back. Charred bones litter the rock. He doesn't linger.

When his mother tries to follow, chiding him, he whips his neck around and snaps at her, and she jumps back. Goes still, eyes wide for a second of alarm. Jon's fingers find her elbow, heart in his throat, wanting to pull her back, wanting her behind him, wanting her away from the volatile beast, but her fear fades as fast as it flared and she presses a quelling palm to his chest. Glowers at her dragon.

"What has gotten into you?" she demands.

It's a worrying question, one he ignores, turning his back on them, pitching back out the way he came. They might not know why he's doing what he's doing, but even Jon understands what this means.

The beast intends for them to stay.

They're farther south now, left in sunshine and grasslands by a waterfall. Not too far south, Jon tells her, guessing by the temperate weather, just enough to leave behind the harsh bite of the North and the dreary moisture of the central regions. This is where Drogon has been hiding, healing. This is where he wants them.

The path down the cliff is tiresome and treacherous, but they make the trek alright. The golden touch of sun and the rushing roar of the sparkling water is too tempting to resist, especially not stuck in a
dark cave surrounded by corpses. They scout a ways in different directions first, making sure there's nothing close, making sure they're secure. Then they relax.

Jon is obviously uncomfortably warm, but Daenerys is ecstatic to be away from the numbing cold. She's in her element.

Wasting no time, she stands at the edge of the water, strips down. At the corner of her eye, she's amused to notice Jon startle, blushing, wrenching his head away from her when any other man would let his gaze linger. She looses her hair and unties her dressings and drops over unhesitantly, slicing into the shock of wonderful blue water, cool and wet against the sunny warmth of the air. She sinks until her toes touch the mud and pebbles at the bottom then pushes upward, breaks the surface with a gasp, so refreshed that laughter bubbles out of her chest.

It'd been too cold to use the frozen river to bathe properly. She'd felt filthy. It's such a simple thing to lift her spirits, but it does wonders.

Dipping under, she scrunches fingers against her scalp, rousting her tresses to get them clean. After she rises, shaking droplets from her eyes, she finds Jon settled in the grass, an arm holding his stomach, one hand behind him on the ground, propping him. Watching her with an expression that reverberates through Daenerys like the kiss of a lightning bolt. It strikes her, then it fades, echoing into her limbs, in her heartbeat, melting her with strange pleasure.

The crinkle of his dark eyes, that soft rare smile.

She wants to touch him suddenly. She wants to crawl inside him.

*I want to keep you.*

The realization steals the laughter from her. She sobers, heavies, still peaceful but less giddy now. *Can I keep you?* some small forbidden part of her is wondering. She can't keep looking at him. This isn't good. *Bend the knee, stay by my side, never stop looking at me the way you look at me.* She strokes languidly through the mild current, face turned up to the colorful sky, legs moving out in front of her, arms spreading behind her, ignoring the twinging protest of her arrowed shoulder. She can't let that impulse, that desire, whatever it is, get out of hand. She banks it like her fire, like she does everything that threatens to take her over.

"It's lovely," she calls, voice raised over the din of the waterfall.

"Careful of your wounds," he warns, always ready to find the gloom. "Just because you're feeling better doesn't mean you won't overtax yourself and make it worse again."

"I'll look after my wounds, you look after yours, Lord Snow."

"Fair enough."

"Do you need help?" At his questioning eyebrow, she licks her lips, adds, "Getting in." Then teases, "Or would you prefer I turn my back to protect your modesty?"

He grimaces at her in reply. Mock annoyance.

But he doesn't move. She knows he'll deny himself because she's making him nervous. She gives him a no-nonsense look, pulling the queenly temperament up from where she'd left it. "Come to the water, Lord Snow. Get clean. You'll feel better."

It doesn't take much for him to surrender. He's been as enticed by it as she was, holding back for her
sake. Or perhaps she's wrong. Perhaps it had nothing to do with honor. Perhaps he's afraid of her.

Either way, he comes. Shucks his top, his boots, his weapon, hesitates at the laces of his breeches, seeming uncomfortable again, making her grin and spin to put him at ease. She doubts she's ever met a man as both bold and shy at alternating moments as Jon Snow.

When she hears him wade in, she spins back, treading towards him as he gingerly deepens. She imagines he's sore from Drogon's flight. He's frowning at the crystal surface as he goes, at the temperature or pressure of the current or how far down he can see perhaps. He bends his knees, drops under, careful to keep his middle locked straight. She bites her lip against a smile, watching him soak down the increasing wildness of his black curls.

He comes up, errant locks slicking over his face before he rakes them back. She wants to reach for him, wants to brush her fingers into the bits he missed. It's a strong impulse, strong enough to unnerve her. So she splashes him in the face and swims away.

They sleep in the grass when night falls, building a campfire to keep the animals away. They stay close in the dark, but there's no reason to be beside each other, to tangle up under furs for body heat. The night breeze is barely cooling, not even a little chilly. There's no need to cover up. She stays in bare minimums. He doesn't even put his tunic back on from where he'd left it by the water, just the washed out binding around his stomach, his ribcage.

There's a few arm lengths between them. It feels odd after so long spent on top of each other. It's for the best.

"Let me teach you," he implores. "You need to be able to defend yourself when you come down off your dragon. I can teach you."

She doesn't say a word. She just lifts that inscrutable stare, fixes on his face for a long time, long enough to make him shift with nerves, but he doesn't give in and let his eyes drop. He holds it, serious about this. Anxious about what she finds when she studies him, measures him, but he won't shirk from it. And he must not disappoint her, because she does eventually concede, pulling in a decisive breath, nodding once.

She takes to it eagerly. He can tell that surprises her.

They end up spending much more time and energy on the endeavor than either of them anticipates, once they get started, falling into it with eventual fierceness, from tentative to dedicated. It takes a few days of discord, halting and awkward, but they find a rhythm.

Training her in the meadow with the dull sword. Getting her used to the weight, fixing her stance, building the muscles in her arms needed to heft it, swing it, how to arc and jab and bar and parry. She's stronger than he expected, though he shouldn't be surprised from a dragonrider. With how small she is, she still won't stand up under the strength of a full grown man, so he teaches her to evade, to twist her hips and her shoulders and make the blade glance off her own when it comes rather than try to bear the impact with straight resistance.

The task stretches out his middle, strains the disused muscles there, and his fractured ribs protest, but the stab wound does well. It no longer limits him quite as much as it had been. The pain inside is beginning to weaken.

He makes her get familiar with the dagger, how to handle it, until it's second nature in her hand, until
she can play with it. He shows her all the tricks he can think of with the smaller weapon that could save her life, avoid the disadvantage she'd be at against any large opponent with a longsword or spear that might come for her. He teaches her, demonstrates, puts his hands on her body to move her through the motions when she gets something wrong, then he watches her practice.

She practices for hours, for days, and he shouldn't be surprised by her quiet fervor by now, but he is. He always is.

He'll open his eyes to find her down by the water, working the motions in the moonlight when she can't sleep. Or he'll wake to her in the meadow with the sword, swinging it around her, firm two-handed grip at the hilt, face smooth and focused. Frustration slips through sometimes, dissatisfied with herself, but it never stops her. And it does them both good, in more ways than one. It pushes recovery.

Before long, he's convinced she'll become quite the fighter.

Warrior queen, conquering the world on the back of a giant dragon.

He can't tell if it's awe or dread he feels.

Drogon comes in and out. He returns often, swooping into the cave with a fresh kill or curling up in the meadow to bask under the sun. She'll put her hand on him and feel the vibrations as he rumbles. He's perfectly pleasant until she brings up what she wants him to do. If she coaxes and manipulates, he ignores her. If she pushes too hard and gets commanding, he flies off in a bad temper.

He doesn't want to take Jon Snow back to Castle Black. He doesn't want to return to Meereen with her. Not even guilting him over his siblings and their uncertain fate seems to move him.

So she turns her attentions to the other stubborn male at her mercy. She vents her helpless frustration with Drogon by pushing and prodding Jon instead. He's about as malleable as her dragon, but he listens better. She sees potential in that. She thinks he can be influenced. Ignited.

It's for his own good. She's got greater concerns, should be focused on her own insurmountable goals, but she's grown attached to the Lord Commander over time and she doesn't want to keep her fire to herself.

In their talks, when he spoke of Winterfell, about growing up there, leaving it behind, and holding himself back from returning when it was stolen, she held her tongue. She turned it over in her mind from time to time, and the better she begins to know him, the stronger she feels about her initial opinion. So she pushes him. Doesn't let him shut her up with his standard broody dismissal, all about sacred vows and greater duty. She pushes past that, pushes him to fight for what is his by right and what should be, what he wants to be. To do more than uphold his duty to the Night's Watch. To fight for his home. His homeland.

It angers him, exasperates him that she won't back down. "I cannot abandon my post, Daenerys. My responsibility is first to the Night's Watch."

"So do not abandon one for the other," she says. Fiercely. "Do both."

They're on the ground, sat on opposite sides of the campfire as his catch cooks. Staring at each other over the flames. She can see he doesn't understand, doesn't agree, dislikes her for arguing such fanciful ideas he believes are impossible.
"Command the Night's Watch, guard the Wall, keep preparing your men as best you can for the coming war. But also rally the North. Rally it behind its rightful protector. Secure the support you need and take back your home."

"That's not how it's done. I took an oath. I made vows to hold no land, take no wife, father no children, wear no crown. I'm not like you, Daenerys. I'm not—"

"That's not how it's done?" she parrots archly. "Jon, you know where I came from, what I did to get where I am, what I intend to do to go where I will. Do you think my triumphs came about by following men's rules? By doing as things have always been done? No. I change the rules. I change the world. I don't hold to meaningless words, cages meant to limit us, to keep us from doing what we must."

"My vows are not meaningless," he growls.

"They are," she insists, undaunted. "They are, Jon Snow. The only important one is your resolve to protect your people from what wants to destroy them."

His silence is heavy with emotion, with his loud thoughts taking up space between them as he frowns into the flames, arms on his knees, digging a stick at the earth by his feet. After awhile, though she knows he doesn't believe her, doesn't agree, he indulges her enough to say, "The northern lords won't follow a bastard."

"Even Ned Stark's son?" she challenges. "If the choice is between a rightful son of Winterfell who's fighting for his people, for his family, who wants to put the North to rights? Or the House that betrayed them all and ravaged their land? The dogs of a terrible southern ruler?"

"Aye, well, I don't have your gift with words, do I? You speak and I imagine a many rough stubborn lord would fall in line behind your fire. The ones that aren't swayed by your passion would be convinced by your Drogon."

"You'd be surprised." Then she adds, "If I am everything you say, think of this… You convinced me to devote myself to your cause, did you not?"

"I didn't," he denies, determined to brood. "You dismissed me for a madman until you were in the thick of the fight."

Daenerys gives him a smooth smile. "You were persuasive, my lord. I was extremely preoccupied. My life, all my work coming apart around me, while I was helpless to get back and address it. It was the worst possible time you could have reached me and still… I would have believed you, given time." Impassioned, putting steel into him, she tells him, "They won't fall behind a bastard? Make them. Make them listen. Make them believe in you. Take back what you need. Don't let anyone stand in your way or scare you or talk you out of what you know you must do. I've fallen into that trap too many times. I let the doubts of people I respect make me doubt myself. I'm done with that now. I will take no prisoners, I will allow for no compromise on things I know are wrong, and I'm done wasting time. You should be too."

+  

She makes him think of his wildling, his pretty kissed by fire girl that taught him how to love, how to pleasure, how to make something his own. I learned how to make her mine. He never should've let that go. Duty over love. Honor over devotion. Some nights, he knows he made the wrong choice, and then just that thought causes him shame. And now he's slipping towards the same fate again.
Her strength isn't the same, but it is in spirit. Her dauntlessness, her obstinance, her ability to wrench him out from inside himself with a mere smile, force him to look at the world from a new perspective, the world and her and himself. The ability to make him want things, dream of things, an impossible future. They've got the same backbone, the fallen girl kissed by fire and the magical woman of fire made flesh. The backbone, the ferocity, the edge of wildness, if nothing else, makes him think of the one he lost.

He misses her. He's been missing her more frequently than before even, being out here, stranded with the strange queen. But the longing that always came with those thoughts before, the grief and loneliness and surety that he murdered something he can never replace and will never make up for, will never know goodness again after… That longing doesn't hurt as much these days.

Dany is different, not similar at all really, but sometimes she can be mean. Not just fierce and hardheaded or overbearing, all of which she can be, but plain mean. Casually mean in a way he recognizes. And he'll grudgingly admit he finds himself responding to that.

What he doesn't expect is for her to see it. To parse it from his face, his eyes, his words, the way his body moves around her. How easily she provokes him, frustrates him, makes him forget who she is, who he is. She catches him off guard and he almost always takes the bait. Then one day she stops, stops and just stares, searching over him with those striking eyes and a puzzled expression. She'd been stomping off, and he'd been chasing after her, giving as good as he got, refusing to let her have the last word. But she'd spun, snapping like a snarling wolf, like a dragon licking flame over him, and he'd responded to that. Maddened, incited, excited. And she stops. She figures him out.

It turns her cunning, playfully mischievous. He doesn't even know what he just said to her, too distracted, but it makes her reply, "Is that it? Do you enjoy when I'm mean to you?"

Jon grimaces. "Don't flatter yourself." Insufferable woman, his look says, but he wouldn't dare speak it.

Her smile is something magic. Something dangerous.

+ 

"Have you gone mad, woman?! What are you doing?" he shouts up at her just as Daenerys reaches the top. "Come down. You'll hurt yourself."

She's feeling restless. Reckless. She's been staring up at this waterfall in wonder for weeks. She doesn't cope well with powerlessness, with being stranded, left in the dark to everything she needs to know, everything she built, everything she cares for. Her injuries aren't bothering her anymore. She's strong. She wants to test herself. She wants to not leave here without doing this at least once.

"I'm quite healed," she assures him. Feels a thrill run through her as he calls her name wildly, as she backpedals and braces. Throws herself into the rush. His voice rings in her ears, mixing with the pounding water, and her body bursts over the arc into a fast freefall. She yells in celebration on the way down, feeling unlike herself, lost in the roar, choking on water. Finding a sudden outlet for all the turmoil she's repressed.

Needing a new experience.

It hurts when she breaks the surface, but not by much, and even that is enjoyable. She lets the current swirl her, mix her up, until she can't tell which way the sky went. She doesn't fight it. Lets her lungs burn while it pushes her through the volatility to the milder little lake. It brings her up eventually, and she floats on her back, eyes closed, facing the sky.
A chest collides with her side, an arm snaking her waist when the bump sets her buoyancy off. She squints up against the sun, lashes wet and blurry, finding a face torn between frown and smile, both troubled and charmed. He came in after her. She must've frightened him, staying under so long. She stares into his pretty face, feeling good, feeling free.

It's an illusion. She's got chains on her, always had, always will. But it's a nice feeling while it lasts.

They lay on their backs, lingering close, looking up at the vast night sky. She tells him the stories she's heard of the stars.

He loves listening to her myths. Her hopes, her dreams, her plans. Things she's seen that he can't begin to imagine. The awe in her voice when she speaks of old tales she's picked up around far away lands over her life. And listening to her, he begins to realize… *She's right*. She's all she seems to be. She really is the miracle he'd hoped for and doubted when her beast brought her to him in Hardhome. And as his mind wanders, his heart strays, he comes to accept what's happened to him. How she's changed him. How her existence has changed everything.

The thing is, if he were to have children, if he were a man permitted that, he'd be ashamed to bring them into this world the way it is. He'd be troubled, frightened, weary. If he ever had a child, he'd want to give them the world she speaks of.

The world she believes she can forge through her fire.

She rolls onto her stomach, propped on her elbows, a slow smile curving at him, eyes shining with something that could be happiness. Easiness. His fingers catch a wave of silver silk, sifting along the sway of it, curling it tight when he gets to the end, not wanting to let go.

*It can't be broken*. This bond that has conjured up in them, tethered between them, pulling at him from deep inside, tugging him to her. He's afraid of what it will do to him when she goes away.

*Daario and Jorah will be looking for me*, she thinks. Her control slips and the guilt swells up, eating at her. The fear for her people as a whole doesn't compare to the very personal sickness she feels, not knowing the fate of her friends. And they *are* her friends. Missandei is not her servant. Grey Worm is not merely her Unsullied commander. Daario is more than the man she took into her bed. *Grey Worm will feel obligated to the city in my absence, for my sake, watching over it if he can. Beside Missandei…* She has to believe they're alive. That they survived, that he'll protect her until Daenerys returns and can protect them all. *But Jorah will never stop, and Daario will go to the ends of the earth in his search, I suspect.*

It should shame her, remembering the man that desires her so greatly, despite his baser motivations, while she's here … wanting someone else.

Feeling for someone in such a way she's never felt before, a way she doesn't know how to describe, because it's not something she understands. It's a different kind of desire than she's known. Lust is a simple thing, an instinct of the body, easily indulged in and moved past. Love is more complex, but not incomprehensible. It can be a necessity, an asset, or an unwelcome vulnerability. Friendship too, she knows all about. Respect, admiration, longing. She's felt many varying emotions over her years. She understands them. But *this*?

What is this?
She may not agree with his methods, his priorities, but she can't help respecting who he is, admiring even. He might be the first man she's met that truly understands what she's trying to do and why she's doing it. Understands and would do the same, if he had the power. A truly good man, or he wants to be good, tries to be.

When she itches to twist her fingers in his curls or bite his smile, when she craves for those hands, for that body to pin her down, when she has to swallow the hot animal urge to shove him to the ground and ride him, that's lust. That's all it is. He's a beautiful man, this northern bastard, brooding or laughing, awestruck or sneering. It's only natural, it's expected, and it doesn't bother her, wanting him like that.

There are times he aggravates her, there are times she's sure he's become a great friend, and there are times she understands that he's the only man she's met and measured and found merits that mean he would be worthy to stand at her side. To take as her king.

If that were a path either of them were permitted to take.

It's not.

But he's the cause of the swirling inside her, the storm, and so far she has been unable to identify the collective beyond its recognizable individual elements. Is it love? Is that what it is? It doesn't feel like love. Whether it is or it isn't, all she knows is that it's volatile and unpredictable. As in, it makes her unpredictable. As in, she's afraid she can't predict exactly what it might make her do, this powerful feeling.

She's climbing the cliff when she comes to finally accept this, when she stops pretending and instead searches for a way to mitigate it. And when a rock slips from under her feet and she skids. The trek up to the cave is not wide enough to trip and scramble without going off the edge. Knowing this, she doesn't careen but drops heavy as soon as she loses balance, throwing herself flat rather than tip over. Her body hits the footpath with bruising force, an improvement over plummeting to her death.

But when she goes to stand and brush herself off, pain lances through her ankle, almost toppling her again. She tries to bite her lip and put her weight on it again, but it still gives out. So she sits down and regroups.

The summer rain that has been brewing in the clouds, what pushed her to ascend towards Drogon's lair in the first place, cracks loudly through the sky before it opens up and pours. Daenerys can't help but laugh. Drenched, lightning in the midday grey above, sitting here on a narrow flat in the side of a mountain.

He's been out hunting. She watches him cross the field when he finally returns, loses sight of him as he starts up the winding footpath. When he reaches her where she's blocking the way, enjoying the rain, resting her throbbing injury, he's got nothing to show for his endeavors. They'll go hungry tonight.

"Are you alright? What are you doing?"

"I rolled my ankle," she explains, past the stage of irritation and self-pity.

Jon sighs. "You've always got to make things their most difficult, don't you?"

"Did I command the skies to cry?" she retorts.

His eyebrows go up, as if that were actually possible. "I don't know. Did you?"
A smile tugs at the corners of her mouth as she stares up at him, unheeding the raindrops running onto her lashes. "Would you be surprised if that were among my capabilities?"

"At this point, my queen, nothing you're capable of can surprise me," he says, bending and hooking a hand under her knees, another across her back, swinging her swiftly into his arms as she hums in not quite protest. "Walking through fire, riding dragons, making friends so easy with direwolves. Bringing dragons back into the world for that matter."

She's skeptical of his intentions, but unafraid, so she doesn't comment when he holds her tight to his chest and resumes his climb cautiously onward.

He sets her down near the mouth of the cave where she asks, just shy of runoff. She rests her back against the craggy wall, curls one leg under her knee, stretches out the injured foot towards the edge, and watches the rainfall. Feels a sense of peace come over her. Keeps herself from looking his way when he takes a place opposite her, sliding down to sit across from her, knees up, arms on them, those quietly turbulent eyes never leaving her.

All there is in the comfortable silence for the longest time is the weather, echoing off cave chambers, water making music off the rocks between strikes and thunder. Hours go by that way.

There's almost no light left when she finds herself saying, "I've spent so long in the desert now. I miss the storms."

"All I know is the cold," he tells her. Admits hesitantly, "But if I could, I'd want to go somewhere warm. Someplace like this."

"I would take you there," she declares suddenly. Her attention turns from the rain to his face in time to see him startle. "If I could." Stop talking, she orders, scared. Instead she makes an oath. "When the wars are won, when the world is safe, when we're done fighting..." She licks her lips, swallows, fervently whispers, "I would take you there, Jon Snow."

She can't breathe while he looks at her then, measures her, his thoughts masked. And when he pushes to his feet and crosses the chasm, staring down at her, she can't move. He drops to his knees, pressing his palms to the damp stone behind her head, caging her in. Leans in so close that his breath hits her mouth. Something dark and earnest enters his eyes, making her shiver.

"I have to kiss you now," comes his pained rasp. "I hope you understand."

And then the precarious stillness breaks and he crashes into her. Kisses her quick and hard. hungrily. Devours her for just a moment, too fleeting, hands sinking into her hair and twisting, urging her closer when there's already no room between them. If they could just cut into each other, cling to each other...

When it ends, he doesn't pull himself away but wrenches, like it takes all his control and he hates himself for doing it. But it must be done.

"Forgive me."

Daenerys watches him walk out into the rain to get away from her, touching her swollen lips, catching her shaky breath. Knowing with everything in her that she's made a horrible mistake.

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Done wasting time, she'd said. It echoes in his dreams, running through his mind all day, jumping at the tip of his tongue whenever he looks her way.
It's what makes him close the distance between them one day. Interrupts her while she's practicing with the small blade.

When she spins, arm raised, dagger arced, he catches her elbow, halting the strike he's stepped into the path of. She's startled, stills, blinks at him. Out of breath, but not from her practice. Whatever of his mood shows on his face, it sweeps a change through her whole body, starting with her eyes.

_I'm going to kiss you_, he thinks to say, to warn her, to request. It sits on his tongue, begging to be said. _Can I kiss you?_

Remembering the way she'd responded in the cave, he's set afire.

He thinks about pulling the dagger from her grip, tossing it to the grass, stalking forward into her space, guesses she'd backpedal. He thinks about catching her up into his arms, caging her, pressing into her. Peeling her open. He thinks about so many things he might do in this moment, so many things he'd like, he craves, but in the end… In the end, that brash impulse passes. He slows himself, steadies, losing thought and time in her eyes, losing bravery.

"Jon," she sighs, shoulders softening as she sees the resolve slip away, something like sympathy in her voice. And disappointment.

He touches her face then, soft skin under a calloused hand, unveils himself, lets her see all of it when he looks at her with such sad admiration. Awe and longing. Denying himself already what he hasn't even asked for.

Silver lashes hooded, she angles her cheek, nose brushing his palm, breathing in. Her fingers release the weapon, let it get lost in the grass at their feet, but she leaves her arm in his hold, frozen there mid action. When his thumb sweeps the line of her mouth, she parts her lips and catches its tip with her teeth. Jolts him.

Panicked by the force of visceral urge that hits him, he shuffles awkwardly out of her space, blushing, disengaging before it becomes too much, before it's too late. Starts to turn away. But the queen rolls her eyes. She grabs his tunic, tugging him back to her, to meet her mouth. They collide with no restraint left. She bites his lip, frustrated noise humming in her throat, and it makes something similar vibrate from his chest. His hands go to her face again, fingers sinking into her windswept tresses, holding her hard this time.

She fumbles at his clothes, pulling and pushing impatiently to strip him down. Collapsing together to the flowers.

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At first, there's no sense or grace. Mindless need and urgency shove them together in a desperate dance that's messy and noisy and rough like a fight. They rush to get restrictions out of the way, to get him inside her as soon as possible, to rut against each other with breathless intensity. Base instinct. Animal drive. Until he collapses on top of her, face buried in her throat, her fingers digging into his back, and frenzy dissipates. The world slows down. They sink deeply.

Jon should be ashamed of himself, acting so dishonorably, _mauling_ her for hell sake. And aye, he might be miserable about it tomorrow, but here and now, he feels nothing but satisfaction. He intends to savor it. To worship her while she's of the mind to let him. He'd rather hate himself in the future than regret not seizing this before it's gone. _Seizing her._

He shifts his weight off her, one knee between her thighs, the other at her hip, and catches the hem of
her tunic, hands skimming her sides as he drags it upwards, following with his mouth. He marks the exposed skin, maps the contours, kissing and licking and searing his way up. The thickness of an outer hip, the edge of a hipbone, the softness of her stomach, the dip of the ribcage as she pants, the heaviness of a breast, nearly losing control at her raw shudder when he swipes his tongue up the nipple, teeth finding the swell in a harsher bite because of it than he'd meant. His mouth moves across her collarbone, lingering under her jaw, feeling the wild beat beneath the skin. And then he finally reclaims her lips, fingers curving over the nape of her neck, controlling her, urging her as she arches off the ground.

She's soft and taut and straining beneath him, pliant between demanding beats. Her arms had unwound, spiraled out, clutching at the grass over her head while he'd explored her. Now she clutches at his hair, sucking his tongue, biting at him, whining into his mouth, this needy and insistent sound that drives him crazy. She pins his hips with her knees and urges him by the force of her heels at the backs of his thighs, making him forget his plans, his restraints, making him slide back into her and pump.

He spills inside her again, too soon again, jerked on by the woman's eagerness, her breathless aggression. They lay under the sun for awhile, bodies plastered together, tangled lazily, drifting in the afterglow. It becomes a tide, the flow that sweeps in and stokes them to a fevered pitch before the ebb after climax leaves them sated, and then back to the beginning it goes.

When the bonelessness eases, he kisses his way down her body again, ignoring the resistant tugs of her fingers in his hair. Her eyes are shut, her head thrown back, sprawled out like her dragon in the meadow, shameless, contented. Warm. She's this foreign sight to him still, something he'll never get used to, that strange beauty he wishes he could capture. He settles between her legs. He runs a hand up from the bend of her knee, hitches her thigh over his shoulder, gripping the crux of her hip to hold her down when he closes his mouth over her.

"Jon," she gasps, and her spine bows again to a painful sharpness.

It's powerful. It makes him feel powerful, the affect he has on her, the control he has like this, the such freely given extent of her submission. She'd let him do whatever he likes to her now, here in this moment, because she wants him. She's proven that. He still can't quite wrap his head around it.

And while she's quaking and huffing and murmuring incoherently in a language he doesn't understand after he's brought her to some great peak and unraveled her, Jon rises onto his haunches and grips her knees. He yanks them and her body drags down the grass to him.

"Okay?" he questions, rough, almost an afterthought.

She's not quite paying attention, but manages a distracted nod, an impatient grunt when she reaches for him. Hooks her legs behind him again and knocks him down over her. He catches his palm by her ear, pulling her hair, but she doesn't notice. Arches up, steals his lips, biting at him again. She tears a groan out of him and he's done waiting. He pushes back into her, hard, quick, until their hips clank enough to bruise. He draws out slowly, pushes in again with so much force it grinds her body upwards through the flowers, up the slight incline of the hill they've fallen on.

"Dany," he breathes raggedly into her throat, thrusting against her. Bearing her body down into the warm grass and cool soil. She arches, sinks her teeth brutally into the clenched muscle of his shoulder. It pulls a growl from his chest and the sound makes her shiver. Her legs tighten around him, hips jutting up and twisting to flip them, taking his breath as he finds himself on his back, the queen straddling him, riding him.

The wild queen, he realizes, looking up at her, little bit feral, little bit ethereal. Brazen and
breathtaking.

Gripping her hips as they circle on him, he does his best to oblige her, to keep still and let her do as she will, her spine taut, sinking onto him, digging at him, her fingers splayed hard on his chest. Only when she levers her hands behind her does he slip, swinging desperately upright to crash into her as she clutches his thighs, his hips jerking roughly up against her smoother moves.

Daenerys drops her head to kiss him, and he finds himself rasping breathily, "Sometimes I fear I dreamed you up. That you don't exist."

Fierce desire softens on her face, in her bright eyes, into something deeper. Like she understands him. They begin to slow together, their clashing easing into a calmer rhythm, more sensual, less animal. He kisses her long and deep this time. When their thrusting builds to the inevitable tightness just before rushing release, noses bumping, mouths left open as they pant, he strokes his tongue in a quick sweep from her chin over her lips and the tip of her nose, and she yelps.

Kisses him harder, hungrier, keening down in the throat.

He hugs her, fisting her hair, and they roll, spinning and twisting together, one on top of the other until they give up. They lay tangled on their sides, small movements bucking faintly against each other as the shuddering remnants of intense sensation begin to fade.

"I want to take you home to Winterfell," he confesses. In the dark, in the quiet, while she sleeps, holding her close. It can never be.
Chapter 6

I Wish I Could Be Your Knight, And You My Queen

It's like a dream. A break from the cold ugly world. But it's not real. They have to go back, and when they do, they both know whatever they've found here will crumble under the touch of reality.

"Come with me," she says suddenly. "Back to Essos. Help me right my cities." They're naked in the meadow, a fur twisted lazily between them, her head on his stomach as she lays sideways from him, staring up at the stars. Locks of silver hair wind up around his fingers while he half sleeps. "We'll take my dragons, my armies, all my people that wish to come, and we'll sail to Westeros. We'll unite the Seven Kingdoms and beat back the Long Night … all of us together."

After awhile of heavy silence, solemn and sad and obligated, Jon answers, "I can't leave my home. I won't break that vow." As she knew he would.

She says nothing. She doesn't look at him. She fixes on the stars like they're all that's holding her anchored. He hates that he hurts her. Disappoints her. And he knows he does. She shows none of it on her face, but he knows. Because he knows her. He knows her. How did that happen?

What would he give to be a different man, a man that could serve her?

He keeps his voice low, erecting a wall of respect between them, even as their bodies stay melted into each other. "I wish I could stand beside you through your fights, Your Grace, but I have my own here and I can't abandon them. Who knows how long it would take you to return? I can't afford to lose that time." He pauses there, finding the words he's been considering for weeks, finding the resolve he's been wavering before. He sits up, forcing her upright, a light tug at her hair making her twist around to face him. It takes a moment before her eyes lift from his chest, before she'll meet his burning gaze, her breathtaking face smooth, withdrawn. "But I can promise you that I will do my part here while you're gone. That I will take the Night's Watch back and put order to my house. I will rally the North as you ask, somehow, and be waiting for you with as much might for this war as I can."

Daenerys only nods. Turns to face the waterfall.

The old families must be rectified. They've proven unwilling to evolve. Their resistance to her new world puts her reign and her most vulnerable people at risk. That was her mistake, wavering on her allowances for them, being swayed by calls for compromise and culture. The mistake she regrets most is going against her heart and executing Mossador, when she knew it was the wrong thing to do, despite the valid points made by her advisors. And she was right. The masters and their ruling class were never going to be anything but her enemy. But the people, the majority, the freedmen she'd given liberty to, they had been on her side. They had loved her. And she turned them against her with that one irrevocable act.

She swears she'll fix that. She will return to Slaver's Bay and reclaim it, every port, every city, every piece of that horrid place until she's burned light across the darkness. She'll show the people that've
lost faith in her that she can be better, be good for them. Only then will she sail west again. But she must do more than bring violence and freedom. She must find ways to truly improve life, creating a stable sustainable society, just and equal.

How does she do that? Especially with so little time to spare on it, when the North is in jeopardy, when monsters push out from the ice. The temptation to let what she witnessed in Hardhome make the more mundane conflicts fall aside is a great one, but she cannot allow it. She must not abandon her people for the sake of a more urgent threat. The dead are dead. The living are dying. She can stem that. But she doesn't have the time for trial and error. How does she do it? How does she remove the ruling class and enrich the smallfolk? It's not possible. Everything around her, everything she's experienced, says that's not possible.

But she is the Mother of Dragons. She deals in the impossible. She will find a way.

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They start walking when the next summer storm passes.

Drogon is still not cooperating, but they have healed well and know time has come and far gone that they return.

They follow the stars, tracing them to go north. It's days before they reach some semblance of civilization. "Wait here," he tells her, and comes back a few hours later with passage, having begged them a spot on a trader's wagon. She wraps her hair and keeps her head down, lets him do the talking, dismissing any attention directed her way with a casual, "My wife's shy." And they ride for days more without trouble, parting paths with the trader at an outpost, where she slips off the only ring left that's not her mother's and he uses it to barter for food and supplies and a bed for the night.

When he learns just how far southwest her dragon has taken them, he tells her they can't make the whole journey by land. Not on foot.

Acquiring horses takes more than bartering. It doesn't sit well with him, she knows, but they don't have options. It must be done.

First a single mount, then a second a few days later, they begin to make better progress. Making their way north, camping, tangled up together in the brush, avoiding regions of denser populations, detouring whenever regiments are passing in the area. Once they hit harsher weather, their pace drags, but they don't let themselves lose time. They've wasted so much already, hiding away from the world. They can't allow themselves more of it.

Even so, he uses the trek to show her a little of the land she would rule. Resting in townships of somewhat neutral territories where they can afford to not keep completely to themselves. Villagers and their hospitalities. A surprisingly good night when they pass through during a local celebration, bonfire and drinking and dancing. They play their roles to hide their identities, just in case, but he wants her to know these people. He wants her to understand what's at stake, so she has as much personal passion for them as she does for her freedmen across the Narrow Sea.

So she comes back and saves them.

She goes along, pretending she doesn't see what he's doing, what he's afraid of. And it does work, immersing herself with the Westerosi smallfolk, giving her a more vivid sentiment on the resolutions she'd already held. But what it really accomplishes, which he seems to be oblivious to, is simply making her fall harder for Jon Snow.
Riding side by side for weeks, there's not much more to do but think. And talk. Eventually, he
questions, "What will you do? You've sworn you won't abandon Slaver's Bay. You've sworn to
return and fight with me against the Night King."

She's given it a lot of thought. She's been searching for solutions for ages, a sound strategy, practical
implementation of her goals, never satisfied with what she comes up with. She's not a politician or a
military leader, and as much as politics disgust her, she's aware of her limitations and how far a
brilliant strategic mind could take her, if she had one. As she's yet to settle on the details, she just
replies, "I'll need to eradicate the higher masters and their backers beyond the bay."

"You can't kill them all, Dany."

"Just those at the top," she argues, letting the nickname slide by.

He's been using it more and more since they consummated amidst the wildflowers. While it will
chafe her wrong occasionally, reminding her of a girl she'd worked hard to leave behind, mostly she
finds herself charmed, hearing it on that gruff northern tongue and all the intimate fondness it holds
for him. But permitting it without comment and showing him how it melts her are two different
things.

"The most willing and able to pose a threat to the new way. I'll have to hobble them, cut them off at
the knee, make certain they have no strength left to arrange another uprising. I'll need to install a
capable council to rule in my absence. Something to give the people a voice and ensure order.
Possibly made up of half freedman, half hightower, if I can find any proven to have condemned the
slave trade prior to my arrival. They can't all have been completely evil, can they? There must've
been one or two born into the system that wanted to change the abhorrence."

"I don't know."

"If stability is going to last after I'm gone, the hightower will need more than fear. They'll need
incentive. I'll have to find them a new way to prosper. And the freedmen will need better living
conditions, opportunities so they're kept busy building themselves a community instead of festering
on their hatred of the masters." She can tell from his troubled expression that he's overwhelmed
merely by imagining the insurmountable tasks that await her in Essos. The same issues she will face
here in this land when she returns, if they do manage to beat back the Long Night. "I'm not too proud
to admit I have no idea how to achieve that reality. What I need first is to find better minds more
suited to such workings."

"Aye, but you won't find many brilliant men of the mind to worry about problems like that. Not
many men, brilliant or no, care much about mass welfare."

"Men, perhaps not," she teases. Then continues, "Once my council is in place, I'll leave a contingent
of my forces to uphold its word. But before I sail, I'll need more than just my Unsullied. I need to
find more fighters. Not just armies, but warriors. And an armada to get them across."

Jon looks miserable still, listening to her. "Gods, Dany, I don't doubt you, but that would take a
lifetime."

She throws him a sidelong, a sly smile. "You'd be surprised just how quickly I can work when I'm
motivated, my lord." Then she goes on to explain, slightly nervous but unwilling to hide herself,
"Conquering is what I'm good at. It's the intricacies of trying to unravel and rebuild entire societies
that takes time. That I've failed at."
"War is simple. Peace is a harder answer to find."

"Yes," she sighs.

She's at his side when he returns to Castle Black. In case he needs her, she says. *Insists.* She tugs at the tether between her and her child as they grow nearer, ensuring he's within reach should there be danger, ignoring Jon's displeasure.

"You should wait past the ridge. If it's safe, I'll—"

"I haven't spent all this time making certain you recover only to send you off to your death, my lord."

So she rides in beside him when the gates open, undisguised, head held high. They know what to expect of the Targaryen and her dragon. She's betting on the clear threat of her presence being enough to deter further treachery.

As it turns out, he doesn't need her.

Daenerys watches him freeze, sighting the beautiful girl across the courtyard, coming down the stairs through the throng of men. Rich red hair dusted with snowfall, delicate features, a shine to her eyes as she looks at him. Hesitancy and disbelief there, matching Jon's, before she breathes out and happiness fills her face. The girl rushes at him suddenly, throws herself, and he takes her up about the waist, her arms locked at his neck, her eyes screwing shut, overcome.

"*Jon,*" she gasps, and it's the starkest relief and despair Daenerys might've ever heard. Sansa Stark, she realizes only when he says the girl's name. His sister.

Behind her stands a towering blonde woman in armor, Tormund beside her, and an older man beside him. Daenerys takes the moment to scan the courtyard, taking in all the faces, looking for hostility, for signs of threat. When she finds mostly wariness or pure confusion, and that only from the ones that aren't the vaguely familiar people she remembers from Hardhome, all of whom watch on with nothing but gladness, she feels safe enough to dismount, and lingers back, observing.

"Where have you been?" the girl demands as he sets her down. "I've been waiting for you for months. They said Daenerys Targaryen stole you away. They said you were dead."

"What's happened?" he asks. His frown slides over Sansa's shoulder to the greyed man. "Davos?"

"After the … incident," the man in question chooses carefully, darting an unsure look to Daenerys, "I went to fetch your Free Folk. They took over the keep."

Tormund pipes up, "Just holding it for you till you got back. Figured was the least we should do. Knew your crows were lying, going on like the Dragon Queen swooped down and snatched you up, saying you were dead and gone and there was a new King Crow and our deal with you was shit. What'd you do to piss her off, I wondered. Saw with my own eyes just how fiery she was about saving your sorry ass, so we figured she wouldn't turn around that fast and feed you to her dragon, would she?" He shoots her an amused glance, flashes her a grin. "Get it? Fiery."

Her lips twitch, oddly charmed.

Davos says, "All your brothers in black that put up a fight have been locked away. Just till we could sort things out."
"Aye, and my sister?" he wants to know.

She notices the girl still hasn't let go of his arm, her long fingers clenched unconsciously in his sleeve. She's happy for him. Worries for her.

"Arrived a few days after you left."

"Frozen and on the run."

"They've been watching over me since," Sansa offers, a faintly kind smile flickering for the roughnecks around her. The expression says she hadn't expected it, that her impressions of them had perhaps been unflattering, and now she's grateful.

Jon is stunned. He's obviously having difficulty absorbing the new circumstances, the unexpectedness of what they've come upon. She wants to reach for him, impulse after so long of just the two of them almost making her forget herself. Her fingers hang useless at her sides, itching to grip him, to get him looking at her once more. She doesn't move, because it's not right. She's out of place here.

"Come with me, Jon," Sansa says solemnly. "There's much to tell you."

He looks back at Daenerys at last when his sister starts to pull his wrist, but she just dips her chin in reassurance. His gaze meets his redhead friend as he passes and softly requests at the burly shoulder, "Tormund, keep close to the queen."

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So the wildlings took Castle Black, have held it for him until his return. Tormund and Davos have been looking after Sansa, with her knight Brienne, since she reached the gates, escaped from the clutches of the madman that stole Winterfell. The wildlings have his back, he's surprised to discover, as do some of his brotherhood.

It's a good day for Jon Snow.

Immense relief comes after having braced for the worst for so long. The traitors were few, the wildlings are loyal, and to have Sansa back, to have her here and well and a much better woman to him than the scornful child he'd left behind is … incredible. Though he thinks after so long dreaming of home, so much of their family lost and torn apart, he thinks he'd be exactly as glad to have her even if she were as cruel to him as she'd been when they were children.

Jon and Sansa spend hours alone, holed up in the Lord Commander's tower, catching up in front of the fire with quiet voices and drink for as long as they can afford before the others come knocking, patience run out.

He addresses the entire keep that night, all gathered in the hall. Wildlings and Night's Watch and misfits. Blunt and concise, he explains the mutiny, how he was saved, stranded in recovery, and his unprecedented alliance with Daenerys Targaryen to help them survive the Long Night, forging ahead with angry steel through the ebb and flow of each uproar.

He says, "The world has changed. We are changing with it. In thousands of years, we've never faced anything like what's coming now. There's no time to hold to traditions or the letter of vows. That's not what matters. What matters is coming together properly, doing everything we possibly can to ready for this war. We are the watchers on the Wall, the shield to this realm, the first line of defense, and we will ensure the living triumphs over the dead. But not by doing what we've always done. And not by fighting amongst ourselves."
It's a declaration meant to prepare them for what he means to do, what no Lord Commander has ever done. Hold no lands, wear no crown, align with no campaign. The only vow he's certain he can uphold anymore is to guard this realm, protect his people from what lies Beyond.

Daenerys is right. Breaker of Chains, her people call her. She's broken his, that's for sure. She's made her way in this world by breaking all its rules. She's taught him how. He can't relinquish command of the Night's Watch, he won't, but he needs to be more than that to fight this war. He intends to be more.

The first step to that is retaking Winterfell. For Sansa, for Rickon. For Robb and their father. He'll kill that Bolton bastard if it's the last thing he does, and if it's not, he'll give Dany the forces she needs to help him win this war.

She sits in the tub until the water ices. Stares at the white out the window, feeling as if she's lost something. As if she's mourning. Forcing herself to focus, to climb from the bath and shake off her thoughts, is akin to donning armor for war.

Awareness of Drogon in the distance pulses at her mood, comforting her but stressing her too. They've come to an understanding recently, her and her intractable son. His anger at their deserting his lair did not stop him from chasing at their heels. A few times on the road, he'd landed and offered to take them up. She knew better than to fall for that again. This was a tug of wills between them, and no matter what she's done, she is still his mother, and she would win in the end.

He's beginning to accept defeat, she can feel it. When next she climbs onto him, she knows he'll do the right thing and take her home, back to his siblings. She'd been so busy being aggravated by his defiance, it took her too long to really listen to him. Even once she's paying attention, untangling the hot snarl of his feelings to get at the root of his actions is difficult.

But she knows now.

Drogon was more affected than it occurred to her by Hardhome. Falling from the sky, struck by an ice spear, so grievously wounded. It was his first taste of true fear, the first faltering of his invincibility. He'd masked that under annoyance and anger at her. She might not understand still what drove him so far across the Narrow Sea to begin with, what pulled him to Jon Snow, but his following actions aren't so baffling anymore. He'd just wanted her to be safe. To stay with him in a way she hadn't in Meereen, couldn't, since he grew too large and she took on so many distractions, so many people to care for that she'd neglected her children. Or so he feels. He's been feeling estranged for a long time now, even before he ran. And what happened in Hardhome seems to have shook him profoundly.

There are so many mistakes Daenerys has made. So much left to fix.

She's just gotten the cloth half around her, still dripping, when the door opens and the big man stomps in, jerking to a stop at the sight of her. "Ah, fuck," he curses, swivels his head, eyes wide like he's worried she'll feed him to her dragon if he bothers her modesty. He hefts the pile of garments in his hand awkwardly. "Got you something to put on, is all."

"Thank you, Tormund," she says tonelessly.

It's enough to loosen him, get that grin back. He tosses the pile onto the bed and shuts the door. While she dries and dresses, she knows he's right outside.
He's been sticking uncomfortably close to her for days now, ever since Jon effectively left her safekeeping in his hands. It seems the only time he's not the crass shadow towering over her is when he's lurking after that lady knight. Brienne, was it? These northerners evidently prefer their women hardy. And repulsed, as the lady knight has made clear every time she turns away from his grin with a grimace, which once or twice almost gets a laugh out of Daenerys. The poor man is trying hard, and so hapless. He reminds her of some Dothraki men she's known, if the Dothraki ever had any respect for women.

She appreciates the guarding, but she doesn't know quite how to act around these strange people. They're a little like Jon in ways, but not at all in far too many others. The girl usually with him is easier to talk to, to smile at, quiet Johnna, who's got hero worship in her face since Daenerys saved her little sister Willa from the flames. The girl is at her heels wherever she goes, the tiny thing and the bulky redhead, while she tells herself not to search out Jon Snow but can't keep her eyes from sweeping, can't quell the disappointment when she doesn't find him. She won't go up to the tower and intrude. She remains among the wildlings and the few black brothers brave enough to wade into the circle.

As she enters the hall, she doesn't hear the insult, she can only imagine, but it couldn't have been flattering, because Tormund's elbow knocks the offender in the back of the head. From a distance, it could've seemed casual, but she knows her defender put genuine force behind it.

"Watch your mouth. She's the one that's gonna help us rain bloody fucking fire down on the Others."

"And that southern cunt," somebody else jeers under his breath.

She joins the table despite the discord. Ignores their looks. Struggles to eat the gruel in front of her, feeling deeply queasy. That's just what she needs to impress herself upon them, vomiting across the tabletop. But she gets it down. While she's wasting so much concentration on just chewing, the greyed man sits down beside her, Tormund at her other hip, Johnna squashed between the two men across from her, Lady Brienne at the end, observing them all uneasily.

"So," he says when she doesn't bother to look at him, clears his throat, "I suppose you're the Targaryen everybody's got so much to say about."

Daenerys lifts her eyes then, regards the man coolly. "Davos, was it?"

"Yes, Your Grace."

He's the first since Jon to show her that formality. It doesn't bring her guard down, but it makes her more willing to be polite. Jon said you served as Hand to a Baratheon, she almost says, catching her tongue just in time. Jon's fond of you, she could offer instead, but she doesn't, because they've too many spectators. "And what is it you have to say about me, my lord?"

"Nothing yet," he answers honestly. "Hard to know what to think about you, ain't it? Whatever the Westerosi may say of your name, wildlings haven't stopped extolling your valor since they got here."

"Why shouldn't we?" Johnna pipes up, quiet mouse going bold and defensive, making Daenerys smile. "We'd all be dead if she and her dragon didn't come for us. They flew down out of the sky and set the whole world on fire, burning those bloody Others faster than they could catch us!"

"Sounds like something out of a storybook," Davos tells the little girl with an indulgence about him, a fondness that softens the queen's suspicion. He likes children. That's a good sign to his character, she'd say.
"It was!" she insists, and the two brutes sandwiching her grunt at that, which could be affirmative or dismissive, it's hard to tell.

Daenerys tempers, "I was returning the favor. They showed me shelter when I was in need."

"That was King Crow's doing," Tormund counters gruffly, one shoulder shrugging off her false courtesy. "Not ours. You could've picked him up and flown off like you did the next time if you were looking to repay favors."

"There were many efforts that saved us all that day. The Battle of Hardhome—" she starts to disagree, but he cuts her off again, no sense of propriety.

"It wouldn't been no battle if you and your beast weren't there. It'd've been a fucking massacre." Then he rethinks it, adds, "You and Snow, that had the smarts to charm you."

She should be offended, should scorn him to dissuade the room at large from such dangerous speculation, but she's too amused. "Is that what you think happened? Will you tell that tale, Tormund? That your Lord Commander seduced the Mother of Dragons and aimed her dragonfire?" she challenges, stuck somewhere between humor and arch threat, almost forgetting the sickness in her stomach.

"We all know how pretty his face is," he answers, flirting with danger.

"No," the little girl asserts with a glower at the redhead, who just grins, reaches over to ruffle her hair before she swats at him. "She didn't save us because of a boy." It sounds like she'd be mightily disappointed if that were the case. "She's a dragonrider. She doesn't need boys."

And they all laugh, tension not forgotten but easing. "Ain't that the truth," Davos assents, his low thick accent all but lost under the din. Even the big blonde seems to let tentatively go of her bad mood then.

"You would make an excellent Queen's Champion," she tells the girl quietly on their way across the courtyard later, a conspiratorial smile shining down on her. "I wish I could wrap you up and take you with me when I leave." The way Johnna puffs up with pride and excitement has a burst of something fond and warm and protective bloom in her chest, something she hasn't felt in a long time. That motherly yearning.

The traitors are hung at sunrise and Daenerys decides that it's time for her to go. She watches him cut the rope, watches him turn his back. After he shuts himself away, having to hang his own men, having to banish the boy that conspired with them, she goes to say goodbye. To comfort him first.

"I don't want to leave you, but I have to go now. Please be strong, Jon Snow. Please survive. I need you here when I come back."

What can she say to him? What would help him? What can she afford?

He can't tell her. If she's told what Sansa has asked of him, if she knows their odds, she won't go. She'll fight his battle for him, win it most likely, but he can't let her. This is his fight. She has too many of her own he's already kept her from for too long. No, he'll let her go. He has to let her go.
Somehow, he'll rally the North to his side, increase their numbers. He'll use her name to lend weight behind him in her absence.

Any other instance, the support of a Targaryen invader would assure every door of every lord slammed in his face. But if he can speak, if he can explain, he thinks he can convince them. He thinks he can get them to take him more seriously, even with just the phantom of the Dragon Queen at his back.

Her hand comes down on his shoulder as he's bent over the war table. He sighs, clasps it, turns his head into it, presses his mouth to her knuckles. Meets her eyes. Draws her in. His thumb rubs at her palm, turning his body into hers because she comes when he pulls, pressing into him, soft and sad.

Stay with me. The plea hangs on his tongue, thick in the silence of everything unsaid. He can't go with her, and she can't stay. He won't regret any of what he's let happen since she fell out of the sky, but they both know this was a grave mistake. He's never been so acutely tempted to beg off his duty before. There have been so many times he's come so close, had to literally be dragged back, and yet today is proving still the starkest.

She leans up on her toes, ghosts her mouth across his before pushing firm, wet, scorching him through the inside. Pushing all the emotion she won't name into him with her kiss. Pushing at that restrained wildness. When she pulls back with a gasp, rests her brow to his, he forces his hands from her, puts them rigid to his sides. Against his lips, she whispers, "I exist. Don't forget it."

"I won't," is all Jon can manage.

They say goodbye, never quite expecting to see each other again. He'll most likely be dead by the time she comes back. If she comes back.

+ "Dragon Queen," a woman calls, gruffly demanding her attention as she walks by, leaving the tower, leaving Jon. They turn to face each other. It takes a moment, but she recognizes the face. A wildling spearwife. Karsi, she thinks, but only certain once the woman swears, "You carried my daughter out of that fire. Ask on me and I'm yours. Me and my clan."

+ Jon emerges from his rooms to grip the rail when he feels the familiar quake of Drogon hitting the earth, hears the startled shouts of panic and awe echo out. She doesn't look back, not even once, but he can't take his eyes off her. He watches her fly into the sky and fade, wishing…

+ "King Crow and the Dragon Queen fought for us. Killed for us. They were willing to die for us. We'll never be kneelers, but we'll fucking follow where they lead!"

And the battle cry rings out.
Chapter 7

Time Moves Unkindly

The scent of him lingers on her skin, despite the bite of the wind, until it gets washed away by the sea.

Drogon bucks, a spike of warning all she gets with a hunger pang before he tucks his wings in and arrows downward, diving into the waves, dragging her under. Snapping fish into his jowls. The force of how hard she has to hold onto him to not be ripped away skins her palms, leaves her bleeding when he resurfaces, gasping for air, choking on saltwater.

She complains, lets him feel her irritation, but she can admit it's only fair. It's a long flight he has to carry her through. She'd be less understanding if he didn't land once they crossed the sea and seek her out prey of her own. Letting her rest at the lip of a green cliff for the night before they start off again, flying over the northernmost Free Cities, crossing mountains and desert dunes to reach the central southern bay.

They circle the city, staying high enough in the clouds to be obscured, as she tries to make out the state of things. It's useless from the sky, but at least nothing looks ruined or burning. The first thing she does is go for her dragons. Drogon lands at the bottom of the pyramid where she'd locked them away. From his back, she shudders in fear, mother and son ready to decimate, fiercely commands, "Dracarys." And he blasts through the stone.

Rhaegal and Viserion crawl out of the rubble.

They're still chambered. They're unharmed. An explosion of relief slackens her aching body, so rigid, relief and joy and guilt and despair. They unfurl their wings and stretch their necks and sing out to her, circling their brother, and she says tearfully, "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry, my loves. I promise you'll never be in the dark again."

For so long, she'd forbidden herself to think of her children. Part of her had truly been convinced she'd return to their slaughtered bodies.

She'd been prepared for absolute devastation.

With that in mind, she finds things better than she'd worried. Much better.

Her Unsullied and the Second Sons kept the uprising in check, beat back the Harpy's Sons, and the city has been hanging narrowly on, overseen by her advisors. Soldiers posted on every street, flooded through after the attack, bringing bloody battle to the inner city to stop the slaughter of freedmen. Astapor and Yunkai have once more fallen to the masters, but Meereen is maintained. Missandei, Grey Worm, Tyrion, among faces she doesn't recognize, all freeze in shock when Drogon drops her onto the veranda and she strides inside. She isn't pleased with the armistice Tyrion arranged with the masters of the bay, but it bought them time, held off invasion by the sister cities.

"You brought back slavery?" she thunders.

"Only a little," he hedges.
"Your Grace," Missandei interjects, "I am elated you are well, but… Where have you been?"

"That is a very long story, my friend. One we will all need to pore over at a calmer time, since it greatly impacts our courses going forward."

She gives no warning to her assault. She will not tolerate the Wise and Good masters making demands of her, and she will not tolerate their pompous Free City emissaries left to oversee her as Tyrion had. A look to Grey Worm, a short bark of Valyrian command, and her Unsullied guards surge from their posts at the fringes of the room, spear through the Slaver's Bay noblemen before the chaos of her arrival has even settled. Their sneers turn to screams and then silence. Her Lord Hand looks at her in shock, which fades to put upon exasperation, and not a little fear.

"The time for concession is over," she announces.

"We struck an accord," he protests. "You can't just slaughter everyone you don't get along with. You're supposed to be better than that."

"Get along with?" she echoes sharply. Dangerously. "This is not a play yard disagreement, Lord Tyrion. No one will be compensated for evil. They slaughter people under my protection, they provoke dissension and betrayal in my city, they attack my soldiers, they attack me. Even if they had not, do you honestly believe they have any intention of holding to the conditions of your accord? They want me dead. They want their slaves back. They've placated you while they amass resources to destroy us."

"You don't know that."

"I know men," she says. "I know masters."

"I did the best I could manage with what I had. You were missing, thought dead, we had no dragons, we're outnumbered and under siege from outside and within. I did what was necessary to deter them from moving against us."

"You did," she grants. "You held my city together when I could not, which is the only reason I'm allowing you to live for betraying my law. No more slavery, Lord Tyrion. No more."

Once the Great Pyramid has been brought to order, she sends riders out to fetch Daario, Jorah, and their men back from their searches. Then she puts everyone to work, righting the ship, as it were.

She has Meereen scoured for every last Harpy's Son, homes searched, streets hunted, rousting secret meetings, turning former masters against each other into informants through intimidation and enticements. They line dozens of guilty men along the parapet and take their heads before the entire city. The high lord that had been arranging them, that had orchestrated the uprising, he's set below his beloved harpies and the city watches as her three dragons land around him, as they burn him to ash. Overkill, certainly, but an unforgettable message.

She makes Meereen understand what will not be tolerated, what will happen if they persist, and then she gives them better options to grab for. Avenues to redirect their ambitions. Swift death or a chance at reward. That's what it comes down to. And the ones that infiltrated from its sister cities to instigate and organize, she sends their heads back to their masters.

"My hands are no longer bound by the fear of becoming my father," she tells her council when they look at her with concern and wariness and horror. As they attempt to sway her from her convictions. People she trusts, yes, but people she has to remind herself are men, white men that've come from wealth, that have never known true injustice against them. Men that have never been raped and sold
and starved, who have not spent their entire lives without choice or the smallest power, not even over
their own body. She's come to realize she must always weigh that when faced with their advice. "Let
them think what they will."

Her people, the ones that call her *Mhysa*, the ones she freed, they never look at her like that.
*Missandei* never looks at her like what she's doing is unreasonable or unjustified. Because people
like Missandei have suffered at the hands of the men she would bring justice to. They know what
true cruelty looks like.

"I know the truth. The people will too. In time."

She's woozy still. The stomach sickness comes and goes sharply, unpredictably, and for awhile it's
fine. But then she starts getting sick every day. Every. Day. Even the thought of putting food in her
mouth makes her gag. She gets weak from it, dizzy from it for a time. Among other symptoms.
Missandei notices, but she keeps her silent with a stern look when the girl would speak.

She doesn't dare ride Drogon while she's so unbalanced.

But when the Wise and Good Masters come, there's not much of a choice. She sends the Unsullied
to blockade the ports, and she climbs his wing and settles, pushing through the fatigue. She tries to
keep him steadier than he would normally bother with, tries to make him fly smoother, because she's
not sure she could hold on if he tips when a wave of nausea hits her. But her son seems to sense her
problem and shows surprising care as he soars her over the city, his siblings swerving excitedly
around them. They meet their invaders just as they're nearing the docks.

Handles them readily. Surrounding the lead ship before a master has a chance to set foot on Meereen
soil, obliterating it under fire, frightening the rest of the fleet into a swift surrender. Acquiring her a
start on the vessels she needs.

With her dragons in the sky and the Second Sons on the ground, she lays quick brutal siege to the
sister cities, already on their last legs, falling too easily. She reclaims the bay she'd lost grip on. She
and her soldiers and her mercenaries and her dragons bring the highborns to heel with a show of
unforgettable force.

Then she looks northeast to the Great Grass Sea.

The landslide of victories drive her farther.

She's no longer afraid of losing. Or dying. She's focused. She's **urgent**.

Ignoring the vehement protests of her advisors, she rides Drogon into the Grass, searching out a
horde. Has him set her down in their eventual path and sends him off, putting herself to the mercy of
the khal that rides up on her. Weathers the degradations and unpleasantness of acting a slave as they
trek her back to *Vaes Dothrak* to join the *dosh khaleen*. Reminding herself every time they sneer or
leer or whip her of why she's doing this. Why she must.

Once she's among the High Priestess and her crones, she hears of the khalar vezhven happening
soon, and her intentions of calling Drogon forth from the sky and usurping herself a larger khalasar
evolve into something grander. The great gathering will bring every khal of the Dothraki and every
khalasar together in the holy city. A force of a hundred thousand warriors at least. The stars are
aligning for her, she's certain of it. So she bides her time, waiting until she's put forth before the khals
and, with the help of her Second Sons commander and a khaleesi widow, bars them in the Temple
and burns them all alive.

Daenerys walks out of the fire, naked and unscathed, and a Great Khalasar bows down before her. Earlier in the day, collapsing in the Dothraki grass and vomiting, on her hands and knees when Daario found her heaving, and now she stands before them, showing the ultimate strength, showing no weakness. She feels the familiar flutter in her belly and knows. Without a doubt.

It may just be the worst possible thing that could happen to her, masquerading as a miracle she's longed for.

Riding her dragon over the sprawling horde, she claims every Dothraki warrior as her bloodriders. Finally reclaiming her place as a true khaleesi after all these years, taking back what Khal Drogo promised her. She stokes the fervor for war and glory in their blood. Marching back to Meereen with her Great Khalasar, they sack every worthwhile city or stronghold along the way, amassing a vaster and vaster army.

Not always by destroying, but inspiring.

She comes with her horde and her magical beasts out of the sky and she shouts of the coming end, the unavoidable war, the change of all their fates for the better if they fight with her and win the Dawn.

They can beat back the monsters of many faces. The ones that come out of the ice and the ones that have been here all along. She makes them believe that with the necessary zealousness of the devout.

Through the journey, she exerts her power over the horde. Finds her voice amid them as the first Great Khaleesi. Shows them what happens when her laws are broken. No raping, no slaving, no killing children. They try to push her limits, test her word, and she learns how best to wield her authority.

When Daenerys and her Dothraki reach the Bay of Dragons, she's unable to ignore it any longer. She knows the signs. Even if she hadn't felt them once before, they would be glaring. She hasn't bled in nearly six moons by now. She knows.

In the meadow with Jon Snow…

There's too much. She can't consider this right now. She can't let it sway her from her agendas. She goes on undaunted.

+ The Lost Legion came to her shortly after the final fall of the Wise Masters. A Valyrian company of sellswords that had served the masters for centuries, now looking for new payers. She agreed to employ them on the condition that they exclusively raise their swords for her. A force of a few thousand strong, they do as she asks, no more or less, and they are well compensated. If they do not, if they break their word, they know to expect a visit from her dragons.

Over time, many others follow their example, mercenary guilds and freeriders falling in with the Dragon Queen and her host. The Tattered Prince and his Windblown. The Stormcrows.

Before she flew north, Daenerys delegated her most important tasks, spread out over many men from many factions in case of failing or disloyalty. With help of Lord Varys, she sent out priests and merchants and scholars and traders and smugglers and pirates and spies in every direction to search the world for Valyrian steel, to collect as much as possible, and to citadels and temples and archives in pursuit of knowledge. Everything there is known about the Others, about what can stop them,
where to find dragonglass and Valyrian steel, how to construct it. Fool's errand, her court told her, but she sent them anyway.

And for weeks, she debated over who to choose as her champions in her most important order. Not sellswords, not Dothraki. The only ones she trusts enough for this are her Unsullied. So she took a portion of the fleet commandeered from the masters and their failed siege and she set two thousand Unsullied sailing. Under the military command of Grey Worm's recommended captain, the guidance of a carefully selected envoy, and Varys's little birds to smooth the way ahead for them, she sent the reinforcements blindly into the wild of the Westeros North. A reckless effort, even with all the considerations, to aid her newfound ally in his endeavors.

The Unsullied contingent are his to command if they can reach him, to fight for him in whatever he chooses to do.

The vast impenetrable North would be an invaluable asset, Tyrion and Varys agree, so no one argued too hard against her immovable decision. They know vaguely of her time spent with the Lord Commander of the Night's Watch, the strong alliance forged with him, and his with the wildlings, and of his loose claim to House Stark and Winterfell, his possible willingness to forsake his vows and reach for it. They think she has turned a misadventure into a cunning advantage.

Privately, she had Grey Worm bring the Unsullied captain into her chambers the night before they were to sail. She asked for his name and he gave her Marselen, another Naathi like her scribe. Missandei's brother, as it turned out. If she hadn't trusted Grey Worm's judgment on who to choose for this, she'd have trusted that. She warned of the discrimination his men will likely face in Westeros, much the same as they do in Essos but more so, as eunuchs and foreigners and a Targaryen army.

And she asked him to look after Jon Snow as if he were their Mhysa herself.

Determined to her path, she clung to denial for as long as she possibly could. She swallowed down the myriad symptoms and hid her changing body. As she accepts the truth, finally accepts it's not going away, she still refuses to take into account. Not even when she swells starkly in the seventh month, much more pronounced than she had with Rhaego, does she falter. She wears cleverly tailored dresses and loose wraps to disguise it, paramount that her enemies not discover the truth, but of course her council is aware.

None of them are thrilled.

Daario, Jorah, Tyrion, Varys, Kinvara among others, their varying grievances with the predicament chafe her over time, some better at concealing their feelings than others. Daario is jokingly but unhappily outspoken, knowing she'd be too much farther along if it were his. Jorah is guarded and miserable but devoted as ever. Tyrion is drinking through the city's wine supply and waxing on in the background about political ramifications and the ironies of crossing half the world and still somehow winding up fucked by the Starks in one form or another. While Varys and the High Priestess compete for most cryptic. The Spider won't express his displeasure, but he's clearly unsettled. And the priestess…

Daenerys does not like the feverish gleam in her eyes when she looks at her. She does not like the prophecy whispers or the coldness of dread that shivers through her when the Red woman lays a hand on her stomach and smiles late one night.

Missandei, sweet faithful Missandei, she's both happy and afraid for her. It makes it harder for
Daenerys to lock away her own terror.

And she is terrified.

With aid of the High Priestess and support from the Red Temple, she sweeps west to Volantis next, seizing those ruling aristocrats that had funded the Wise Masters and Harpies to overthrow her. The priestess and her well spread servants lure them out, a guise of festival for the whole city to see. She does not burn their manses down, she does not set their bridge aflame, but she descends from the sky on them before they can call their arms. Her fleet sails upon them in the distraction.

"In my city, it is death for a slave to touch a noble," Kinvara had told her when she asked of the Free City. The woman spoke of the life led there for its people and the queen grew almost grateful that its slaveholders made themselves a threat she couldn't afford to ignore. Their choices drew her, gave her the perfect excuse. "The elite sit far above, but they are few and their slaves are many. The city teems of the scorned lowborn. My priests have preached of you, Daenerys Stormborn. Volantis awaits you. They too call you Mhysa. They will welcome your reign."

"And the Red Temple?" she'd countered with a cool quirk of one brow. "Your worshippers may believe your Lord of Light has sent me, but your temple deals in slaves just as heavily as the old families."

"We believe in you because you've come to remake the world. That requires great change, does it not? Our Lord's will overrides our own interest of profit."

And so Volantis falls, as Yunkai and Astapor and Meereen.

The remaining city captains bend the knee and Daenerys lingers only long enough to oversee a new election, as is Volantis custom. Only now, under Stormborn rule, no Valyrian blood is required to cast a vote. Every soul in the city has a hand in the choosing of their new three triarchs, landowners and merchants and sailors and whores and freed slaves. She absorbs the centuries of Unsullied of the city that were bought before the first fall of Astapor into her own host. She installs a contingent of her original Unsullied to stand over the triarchs, to guard them from the captains, should they be foolish enough to betray her.

She thinks of Jon Snow more than she should.

She misses the meadow.

After awhile, it becomes a hazy memory in her mind, a dream that doesn't feel real like the house with the red door and the lemon tree. Something she's half certain she once had, half certain she utterly imagined.

"I have looked into the face of death," she tells them again, again when they would quell her conquering, her court surrounding her. Too bold, they say. Too brash. You're making too many enemies too quickly. And each of them has an opposite opinion on what should be done about it. What should be done next.

No matter how many times she explains what she experienced while she was in Westeros, her advisers still have that look of disbelief and half dismissal about them. If they don't fear her mad, they
simply can't grasp the reality of her words. Though she understands, because you must see it to know it, she still finds herself irritated by their lack of momentum behind her.

They drag their feet and wish to waste time when she needs them to be as galvanized as she is.

"I've seen the end of the world. The end of us all. I will do whatever I can to make sure we survive."

And that is the final chime of their circular arguing, bandying back and forth between each other as she sits, the eye of the storm. She has no patience left for this. Every day that passes, she wants to scream. Doesn't know how she manages to keep herself standing still, not moving, not flying. Back to where she belongs.

*It's only a dream now.*

Over the months, she's gathered one of the most diverse armies there has ever been, peoples that have never united come together now under her flag. It has all coalesced so rapidly, it is near unthinkable. And with them, with the territories she's taken and the sovereignties she's struck steel bonds with, come the representatives. Her inner circle remains closed, that trusted few, but her outer court has become numerous, filled up by emissaries and ambassadors and envoys and acting agents. She's filled her Great Pyramid with spies and politicians and traders and engineers from almost every corner of Essos.

And some from Westeros as well, like Lady Olenna's man from Highgarden and the troublemaking Sand Snakes that Dorne sent her.

Or Ornela, her khaleesi widow, once a docile lamb from Lhazar, now joining her side as an impressive woman freed of the Dothraki. She helped to pull the Lhazareen peacefully under her flag, a small thing in light of the rest of her campaigns, but a thing the queen appreciates. She knows better than most how the underestimated can prove quite an asset.

Besides, privately, she wanted to help them. To gift them in some way, be of benefit to the Lamb Men, because all these years and she hasn't gotten the sight of their devastation out of her memory, what her khal and his Dothraki did to their undefended settlements. Her advisors said not to waste her time, but it was worth it. Not for her, but for them.

Now they all flow out, chambers emptying at the eerie echo of her words. Only Tyrion is brave enough to stay while her mood darkens this way.

"I'm assuming Jon Snow is the father."

She says nothing. They all know who she was stranded with, the only man she spent time with while she was gone. It's the first of any of them to have actually put name to it, laid *his* name onto her growing womb, beyond muttered insinuations and knowing looks. As it gets harder to ignore, to avoid, her body lumbering painstakingly with its progression, her thoughts go more frequently to across the Narrow Sea, and her Hand is no fool to not see it.

"He was a good man when I met him," the little lion ventures, gazing into his cup. "A boy really. Honorable. Kind. A bit foolhardy. But he is a bastard. And oathbreaker, if he laid with Her Grace."

"I will not discuss Jon Snow with you, Lord Tyrion, or anyone else," she declares, turning to face the night sky through the splayed veranda shutters. She knows Drogon rests overhead, napping on the eaves, and his closeness lends her comfort, but there is a storm brewing inside of her, always brewing these days. It tires her. It gnaws at her. She isn't sure what to do to help herself. "It is not a concern."
His laugh is humorless. "You've got to be joking."

"No one will know about this. My child. Not now. Not yet. Not until it's safe."

"What do you intend to do about Jon Snow?"

"There is no answer to that question," she snaps. Then in a quieter voice, "I don't know if I'll ever meet him again."

But he won't let it lie. "If you do? Or if you don't? Who will you say is the father when the world finds out about your child? Your heir? You have no husband."

"Tyrion."
The little lion man shuts up.

She won't let herself love it, nor feel the joy and wonder that should be overwhelming, because she's convinced that it will come out of her disfigured and stillborn. Cursed. And yet…

They are fending off the strike of a Golden Company contingent hired by the high lords of Braavos when she labors under the siege. Bears a breathtakingly beautiful boy while her dragons swerve and flame outside, defending her and their cities. Her babe's loud cries mingle with the screech of the dragons and the scream of dying men on a blazing sunny day.

All she can think while agony rends through her and her body rips itself open for her child's life is a half coherent mantra of despair and regret. Thinking wildly, He should be here, he should be here, he should be with me, we never should have left that meadow.

"I can't birth another dead baby," she whispers, half sobs into Missandei's hand as the woman lets her grip her fingers until the bones creak. She murmurs senseless comforts to the queen in High Valyrian.

And then her son is born. And she can't believe her eyes.

She's been crying and screaming as loud as her enraged dragons as they tear through the sky beyond her window, but when the babe is set onto her heaving chest and she feels the slick heat of his soft skin against her, Daenerys goes still. That raging storm inside calms. Everything quiets for her. He rolls and worms and wriggles up under her chin, pressed tight to her throat, tiny fingers grasping wildly at what he can reach. And she laughs suddenly through the tapering tears.

She's never felt such … such … such relief. Such love.

As if her body can't contain it.

Battle rages below the Great Pyramid, but she feels no fear. She just loves. She just… She's changed.

I wish you were here. I wish you would hold him. Would you be amazed as I am?

Torn and weak and still bleeding, Daenerys stands at the top of the dais, stands regal before the pair of captured mercenary captains brought to their knees below her. They're a pitiful sight as they glare
balefully up at her from behind the spray of blood and grime caking their faces.

"They say you have war elephants. Six thousand cavalry, two thousand archers, twelve thousand infantry. You've not shown me a very impressive force today."

"A sparse campaign to be sure, given their resources," Tyrion tells her, for their benefit, eyeing the men. "They must not have thought they'd need it. Believe it or not, there are still arrogant men left in this realm that wave away your feats as myth and rumor. Most people don't truly believe in the dragons until they're brought to face. By then, it's too late."

The world's continued folly of dismissing her and her dragons has proven both an advantage in her campaigns and an invitation for attack. They don't believe of their existence, then they don't believe in their size and strength, then they don't believe she controls them or the precision with which she wields. She is grateful for that. If an enemy should really grasp her threat, they might find ways to bring her children down.

But doubting her children doesn't explain the invasion today. They've heard what she's done. They know how her numbers have grown.

"We didn't need the dragons."

"No?"

"They came ill prepared. Very unlike their reputation, isn't it? We could have slaughtered them with only the horde."

"Even so, Your Grace."

She cocks a skeptical brow. "Is that it?" she asks the pair. "Foolishness and overconfidence? Or were you sacrificial lambs in a greater gambit?"

The fair-haired captain on the left bares his broken teeth up at her then spits his disdain on the dais steps. Her eyes slide to Grey Worm. With a slight jerk of her chin, he unsheathes his dagger and slits the man's throat. They all watch him gargle and bleed out on the throne room floor before his body stills.

When the remaining captive focuses on her, she says, "It's wise to show respect when you're at the mercy of someone you've wronged. And you have wronged me, captain. This should be a great day for me. This morning, I was happy. That's rare. Now you've killed my people. You've sunk a dozen of my ships. I will remember how you ruined this day."

"Let me have him, queen," Tyene Sand says. Her eyes on the captive are hungry, smug, malicious. Her smile is ugly. "Let me play."

Her sister Nymeria leaves her side, circles behind him slowly, a snake coiling around its prey. Her smile is prettier, but no less deadly. "We'll get to know him. We'll get you every answer you can think up." Her fingers sift through his hair when she passes and he jerks forward from the brush.

Daenerys can only imagine the horrors he'd face if she left him in their hands. The Sand Snakes have shown to have peculiarly alarming tastes. She lets the girls toy, doesn't tell them she'll never permit torture if it could be helped. Let him have his fear and imagination. It looks to have already softened him up some.

"Do you have no tongue?" she challenges.
"The Iron Bank will have its due," is all he will give voice to, mutinous, ominous.

"Curious," she replies, unperturbed. "I don't recall receiving a loan." But she knows what it means.

Places like Lys and Myr and Pentos were hard won with little violence, negotiation and ultimatums arranging them under her will, peace treaties, oaths to adhere to Stormborn laws so long as they wish to retain their independence. Afraid to be crushed, they're moving with the revolution instead of resisting. For that, she's spared them her wrath. Deals, contracts, trading routes established. There's not much left of Essos still holding out.

All that remains is Qarth to the distant southeast, and Braavos to the far northwest, isolated but very powerful enemies to have.

Instead of addressing this with her captive, she regards him coolly, face nothing but unimpressed. "When the Beggar King sought support with the Golden Company, they laughed in his face. We've come quite a long way since then."

"Kill me now and get it over with," he says darkly, no sneer or disdain like his dead companion, just a stoic grimness, an acceptance. "It won't save you. The Company is coming for you."

"I'm not going to kill you, captain." She smiles, a polite thing, perfectly pleasant, fingers locked tight, palms together. "You're my guest."

The Sand Snakes lick their lips and hiss at him, those beautiful unnerving girls, but Daenerys cuts Grey Worm a look and her Unsullied commander fists in the captain's shoulder armor, pulling him ungently to his feet. She starts to turn away before he digs in against the Unsullied urging him backward and recklessness flares.

"Will you not stop until you've conquered all of Essos?"

Her smile is now a cool sharp thing. "And Westeros as well, I should think."

Truth is she didn't set out to conquer this continent. But between seeking allies for the Long Night and bringing her enemies to heel under constant threat of war against her from all sides...

It became necessity.

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Expectedly, the Free Cities weren't happy about the near collapse of their economies that abolishing the slave trade has caused, taking up where the bay's masters left off to unseat her. But she has quashed most before they could even really rise up.

Now that her dragons are grown and she's found an understanding with them, is utilizing them fully in her urgency, now that she's claimed her horde, there are not many that choose to stand against her once they've seen what awaits them in battle. The Iron Bank can always pay a higher price, but there also runs the higher risk, and not many mercenary companies are left still willing. So many have fallen in with her reign.

Allegiance of sellswords may move with the wind, but they have value.

The Golden Company remain the only true threat that could mire her armies in a war that would take too long and cost too many lives if they should decide on all out assault. If their employers should decide to contract them fully. It's an issue her Hand has been raising with her for some time.
"The Stormborn host has laid its might to the Slaver Alliance and it has fractured beneath us. Braavos is all but alone, the last to hold out besides a few inconsequential island chains off the coast. They have the bankers, and the slew of sellswords the bankers can buy, whoever brave enough left to take up against the Mother of Dragons. Of course they grow desperate."

"I cannot afford to go to war with the Company," Daenerys declares. Calmly, decidedly, but she is troubled. She sits at the head of the council table, sunshine from the open veranda at her back, her babe nestled in her arm, suckling.

"Can they not be crushed?"

"They were founded by Targaryen bastards. Surely they'd be willing to—"

"I don't have time to expound on history lessons so you grasp just how off the mark you are," Tyrion snaps, exasperation getting the better of him as her motley mess of allies toss about the war room. "They're exiles and outlaws. They've been fighting their sires for a century. Suffice to say they won't support a trueblood Targaryen. And they never break their contracts. Braavos has sent them for our heads."

"Then why send such a defeatable force?"

"They had to know they couldn't take the bay."

"Perhaps they were testing us. Testing her."

"What need is there for testing? They know what we've done."

"We?"

"She."

"We," Daenerys assures them. "We are together in this now. We must be."

"You let them take glory from your victories but you bear the weight of their failures by yourself," Daario chides.

"And what failures would those be, prick?" Nymeria asks archly.

Daario's eyes roll as he turns to look down on her when she puffs up. "I wasn't speaking of you, little girl."

"She takes the blame for mistakes made in her name," Ornela explains.

Under his breath, Tyrion mutters, "As in the Smoking Sea mishap."

How many had she lost to the stone men after that incident, when one infected sailor kept secret about his ailment and it spread through the whole ship? She confined everyone touched and sought cures through spies over the whole world, but the damage was done. And the Norvos ambush.

"There reasons Dothraki do not ride poison water," Qhono throws stiltedly in from where he stands guard beyond her shoulder.

Ever since she claimed the horde, she's insisted her Dothraki general and many of his senior bloodriders be taught Common Tongue, so that communication between her forces not become a liability. Just as she's had Dothraki women instructing her other commanders on the Dothraki language, despite their resentment of having to learn to speak with savages, as they think. She's tried
to quell the disrespect between her so varied peoples, but it's a long off feat and she's got so many more important troubles to be occupied by.

Daenerys comes to her feet amid the bickering, falling into a soothing sway when the babe fusses.

There are people in this room she hadn't intended to know of her son's existence. She'd meant to only let the few most trusted know the truth, her friends, her loyal guard. But now that he is born and breathing and in her arms, she finds herself unable to part with him when she needs him, their shocked prying eyes be damned. If they belong in this room with her, these people that would fight beside her, then they will hold their tongues and keep her secret. If they do not, she will feed them to Drogon.

Which she made certain they understand the moment they laid eyes on him.

"Whatever the Company's strategy, if we want to avoid facing them, we must convince their contractors to revoke their mission."

"How would we do that?"

"I don't know. Braavos has the investment of the Iron Bank. The Iron Bank is the most powerful institution in this entire damn world. But they speak in gold. We've wrecked their economies, and sacked their debtors, and we've no fortunes enough ourselves to entice them."

"She rules half of Essos. When she crosses the sea, she'll sit on the Iron Throne as Queen of the Seven Kingdoms. How is that not enticement?"

"Would that not bring them profit?"

"If we agreed to settle all the debts of those we conquer once Her Grace sits on the throne, perhaps, but there's not enough gold in the world for that."

"Gold will do no good for dead men," Daenerys cuts in. "When the Night King and his White Walkers spread winter through every realm, there is no price that will turn them away. Rich men will not be spared."

"Your Grace," comes a chorus of incredulity. They won't contradict her, but very few of them take her seriously on this.

It gives her sympathy for the Lord Commander's plight and his frustrations.

Tyrion hedges, "Unless you're able to present the bank with a White Walker himself and proof that their undead army can cross seas..." He sighs. Upends his wine. "Don't expect them to invest in that campaign."

"Investments," she derides softly, thoughtfully, shifting her son.

She hadn't thought of it, the money men behind the curtains, since her exposure has always been to the blood and violence and glory. But Tyrion tells her, "Money makes the laws, Your Grace. Money rules the world. If you make enemies of the great Houses and their lords, you must at least have the bankers on your side."

She has no interest in groveling to the banks for gold, but it gets her thinking. The bankers were funding the masters, propping them up when they would've crumbled from her first conquest. Now the bankers send Company to play games with her. The bankers are the problem.
"You can't possibly wage war on the Iron Bank, Your Grace. They've the Golden Company behind them. Half the world is indebted. They could bring everything down on us. Please, please, do not provoke them any worse than you already have."

*Watch me,* she thinks.

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It takes Varys another moon before his spies are able to tell her where and when that she asks. Once they do, she lays her babe in Missandei's arms and mounts Drogon. She and her dragons take to the sky.

Her advisors wish she should bring assault to the Golden Company's very head, swift and heavy, to teach them it would be wise to forsake war with the Dragon Queen and her horde. But she doesn't go for the Golden Company. They are hired hands. As any sellswords, their ire swings with profit. Their loyalty is wind. She will not hesitate to defend herself from them if she must, but she would rather pay back the puppet master than just cut the puppet strings.

There is a fleet sailing through the Jade Gates she searches for. When she finds it, Drogon and Viserion and Rhaegal descend from the clouds in a fiery trinity.

Ships transporting nearly a nation's worth of gold for the Iron Bank, if her Master of Whispers is to be believed. Extremely well guarded cargo. She sinks it, along with its men and the First Sword of Braavos, champion of its city, sending an unmistakable message in retaliation by leaving their wealth at the bottom of the sea.

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From White Harbor to Pentos on a merchant ship, from Pentos to a spy in Volantis, from Volantis to a rider trekking to Meereen, Varys brings her the news she's been waiting for. Waiting but reluctant to receive, should it break her heart.

By the time it crosses the distance, it's nearly six months old, meaning it could be useless information by now. But if it's not…

"Jon Snow has been named King in the North."

"*King,*" she breathes, stunned. But the shock at that is muddied by the relief that he's survived. He's done so much more than survive, it seems.

"Lord Commander of the Night's Watch, King in the North, consorting with foreign dragon queens across the sea, they say," Varys tells her, hands hidden in his robes. His tone is deadpan as ever, but the words themselves convey amusement. He won't sit, stands uncomfortably at the other side of the war table, as she sinks back into her chair, fingers gripping the gold edges, body melting with the thickness of her thoughts. "He emerged from Castle Black soon after you left, Lady Sansa Stark at his side and five thousand wildlings at his back. They rounded through the northern Houses, minor and major, not meeting with much luck. It appears they had no faith in a Stark bastard, a girl married off to two enemy Houses, and an army of ice savages. Talk of his alliance with you was spreading, stories of your dragon in action, but northmen are slow to believe and even slower to trust. It wasn't until he won Winterfell back that the whole of the North threw their support behind him."

"But he did win Winterfell," she says, pride and joy swelling. Happy for him, for his finally returning home as he'd wanted so badly, been so convinced he'd never have. "And now he has the North."
"He went into the Battle of the Bastards with his wildlings and five hundred northerners, plus two thousand reinforcements from the Vale. He came out of it with fewer wildlings but the largest nation in Westeros at his call."

"What of my Unsullied? They did not aid him?"

"They did not arrive in time. House Manderly barricaded its ports to your ships. The northern exile you sent as guide slipped by and made the trek to Winterfell after Lord Snow had already taken it. They were forced to ride back to White Harbor with the King in the North's own Lord Hand to force the ports open and allow your men passage through to Winterfell."

"Any word of what he's done with them?"

"No, Your Grace. Reports do indicate they were grudgingly welcomed after a time, so I would assume they'd done something to garner gratitude of the northmen." Then, after a pause, he tells her with a small lift of his mouth, "Marselen and his infantry have taken to calling themselves Mother's Men."

Daenerys smiles fondly. She permits herself a selfish moment of love and pride and appreciation for her freedmen before sobering once more. "This northern battle. Varys, how bad was it?"

"Though the sides were evenly matched, the conflict had devastating losses. Lord Rickon Stark the first of thousands."

Startled, she blinks. Says stupidly, "Rickon was just a child."

"The Bolton bastard used him to draw Lord Snow into the open, away from his men. Evidently, he told the boy to run to his brother. He let him get halfway across the field between their armies and shot him full of arrows just as Lord Snow was about to reach him."

Oh, Jon…

"So he has Winterfell, he has the North. What are his plans?" she asks, forcing herself forward, wrapping the queen around her to focus on logistics, not wanting to show all the soft parts that news exposes of her in front of her Spider.

"That, I couldn't say."

"He'll be bolstering the Wall's defenses first."

"If that's what you think, Your Grace."

"Has the Iron Throne shown signs of moving against him for breaking with it?"

"So far, the Lannisters have been preoccupied with threats closer to home," he assures her.

"Thank you, Lord Varys," she dismisses, needing the room to herself as she feels her thoughts begin to overwhelm her. She turns her gaze down to the table as he bows his head and sweeps for the hall, poring gravely over the parchment he'd laid before her. A rough accounting his little birds managed to tuck away.

The King in the North and his strange host. Almost as strange as hers. A historic amalgam of three thousand wildlings, a hundred black brothers, two thousand from the mountain clans, nineteen thousand northmen, nine thousand Knights of the Vale, and forty warships at White Harbor. Including his two thousand Mother's Men, he's gathered quite a force.
It's not nearly enough.

That should leave her head lost in the war, but she can't concentrate.

*I'm sorry for your brother, Jon. I should've stayed and fought beside you. I would have stayed and fought for you if you'd asked me.*

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*Jaehaerys.* Her son will be Jaehaerys, a good name from the Wise King, the longest reigning Targaryen. Her sweet baby boy with his bright Targaryen eyes and black Stark curls. *Wolf and dragon,* she thinks. What a strange union. Unthinkable. *Perfection.*

So many times she contemplated climbing back on Drogon and returning to Jon Snow. *My son… Our son…* But there is too much that must be done.

He's a restless creature, her son, which is entirely unsurprising. He only eases when she sings to him. She'll stand on the veranda under the moonglow and torchlight and she'll rock him softly to the desert breeze until he relaxes. Her first sons draping their giant bodies over the eaves above, curled or sprawled, Viserion stretching his neck down to be near her too. The rumble of Drogon's purr will meld with her melody and the dragonwolf will be content.

She's never felt less alone, or more fulfilled, and yet…

Something is missing.

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"I am no father," Daario tells her, cornering her one night in her chamber as she sets the sleeping babe in his crib beside her bed. He crowds her in, making her spine arch away slightly so she can look up at him without giving ground. His grin is the same cocksure temptation it has always been. It still evokes faint fondness and casual desire. "But a mother needs a lover still."

Not unkindly, a little amused even, Daenerys puts a lone fingertip to his chest and pushes him into stepping back. Brow high, lips curved, she says, "I'm mother to many these days. Too many to count, some would say. That leaves little time for lovers."

"There's always time. There's time right now."

He tries to step in again, but she dances smoothly around him. This is nothing new. Not even when she was swollen with another man's child was Daario dissuaded from pursuing her, utterly convinced he'd find his way back to her bed. She's allowed it, though never prevaricating over its pointlessness, because he's good-natured about it so far, and she knows she must walk carefully along this line.

He commands the Second Sons. He's sworn loyal to her, because he wants her, simply because he wants her, no other reason. If she spurns him too badly, she isn't sure where he might take his mercenaries.

*With the wind, my queen. With the wind.*

Which is perhaps why she permits him to take her jaw in his palms and close the distance for a moment. He kisses her as he's always kissed her, well and warmly in a way that makes her toes curl. But it's hollow. It's missing something.

Everything is always *missing* something now.
The sadness in her face when she pulls gently away turns him serious. "Oh," he says, as his playful smirk fades. Realization in his eyes. His hands lower. "You didn't just take another lover while you were gone." He guesses like it's no guess at all, like he's known for a long time, hoping otherwise. "You loved him."

"I love him still," she confesses, an apology somewhere in her whisper.

She owes him no apology. She owes him nothing of her heart or her body. But she regrets being the cause of his disappointment.

Perhaps she should see if the Sand Snake would want to distract him.

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When Jorah lays his hand around her neck, it's so unexpected, she only freezes. He squeezes until she chokes, until she can't breathe, looking up at him with wide wet disbelieving eyes, betrayal and denial and heartbreak leaving her vulnerable.

Jorah. Jorah is hurting her.

She struggles weakly backward and they stagger into the table, knocking a wine pitcher to the floor. Across the chamber, Jaeh cries from his crib. Panic, terror, it seizes her heart. She can't call for Kovarro or her Unsullied. She can only suffocate. Clawing at his wrist and his face. Her oldest friend. He presses her down, nothing in his expression, no recognition, no remorse, no love, just awful nothingness.

It's not until the knife pulls from behind his back and digs towards her chest that the fierce survival fire ignites, breaking apart that powerlessness of her grief. Her fingers find a goblet in an instant, shoving it between them, glancing the steel off gold before it cuts through her. She remembers the grasp and twist of the wrenching twirl Jon Snow taught her, and she takes his wrist and darts under his arm, freeing her throat, forcing the weapon down. She draws the small dagger she's taken to wearing on her outer thigh, beneath the flowing silk slits of her dress, and slams it up under his chin before he even understands that she's a threat.

That she's more than an easy mark.

He doesn't know. He isn't prepared. Because it's not Jorah.

Before he even hits the floor, she's shouting for her guards. Dothraki and Unsullied are bursting through the doors and down the hall, flooding into the room. Behind them soon comes many more. Her council comes to circle the dead man, standing over him, staring. She rubs her throat, feeling shaky, feeling shock.

No one but the High Priestess has any real words to give.

"Assassin of the Faceless Men," she tells them. "Sent by the Sealord."

"The Faceless Men. If they wear his face…"

"Yes, my queen."

"Leave," she orders suddenly, a quiet storm thundering at them, driving them all away as her eyes never lift from the fallen assassin.

Kovarro bends to collect him first, but she stops him.
Missandei is the last to go when the queen's chamber empties, scooping Jaeh into her arms and taking him with her without asking.

Only once she's alone can she let the shock pass and the truth settle. Her oldest friend. She cries for him, sunk to her knees, shuddering over the body of his murderer. And dumb luck that she's still alive.

Tears turn to a scream of rage. Fire and blood rain down.

Heartbreakingly, she lays Jaeh into Jhiqui's arms, entrusting her Dothraki handmaiden with her most precious possession. Among Missandei and Ornela, the three women care for her babe when she cannot, and they will do so now when she goes. She trusts them to be good to him, to guard him with their lives, and give him anything he needs, but this is the only genuine separation she's allowed since he was born. She's almost not strong enough to wrench herself away.

First comes the assaults on Qohor and Norvos. She flies her dragons north to the mystical Free City, burns their impenetrable stone walls to rubble while the sentries are barely able to raise the alarm. By the time reinforcements manage to organize to come out and meet her, she's already flying past, having cut a straight path through the city as its walls fall. Drogon destroys the great bank lying within, a contingent of Second Sons on his tail, taking their wealth.

In Norvos, she simply lays waste to the smaller banks, just her and her children, while the Second Sons journey back to Meereen, and the Dothraki screamers are pushing steadily north. They meet her past the marshlands, riding towards the lagoon, nearing the Titan before a defense comes in sight.

An army to keep her from reaching their great city.

The Braavosi army sends thousands of arrows into the sky. Arrows and spears from great crossbows and fire missiles meant to scorch her atop her dragon. They never believe the Unburnt until they see it. Her children soar over the battlefield, burning every soldier where he stands, spreading the flames so quickly through the troops as they circle and swerve and scour the land, igniting the treetops so the Braavosi have nowhere to run.

That's when her horde sweeps forward in her wake.

The devastation she wreaks in her grisly northern swath is something she promised herself she would never do. Unleashing fire and death recklessly, careless of the consequences. How many innocents get caught in her crossfire? She doesn't know. This time, for the first time, she doesn't consider it. Not until later, until too late, when the people name it the Dragon Wrath of Braavos. The path of grief cut northwest from Meereen to the jewel tip of Essos, everything between.

When their army is decimated, she flies her dragons over Valyria's bastard daughter and burns the sentries that guard its gates, its battlements, its towers. She brings war with her, full and unflinching war.

Daenerys Stormborn, the conqueror and her dragons and her hundred armies under one banner.

She shows them what that means. She performs another theatrical display to make the might behind her clear, warning the financers that money means nothing to her. All their wealth won't save them if she decides to burn down their banks and melt their gold, which she's perfectly willing to do if they don't stay out of her affairs.

She'd meant to merely scare them into stepping back, the Iron Bank, while she dealt her vengeance
and further into the future too. But one brave man decides to seize the opportunity to their advantage and coaxes her into talks.

Tycho Nestoris lures her down off her dragon only once the Dothraki have fully invaded the city, once she's taken control. He invites her into the Iron Bank for audience and Daenerys follows.

There is pretense here. They are at her mercy. They all know this. They act as if they have any control left, as if they have a position to bargain from, and she allows the charade to play out. She will do what she will, but she doesn't necessarily want to cause the far reaching repercussions through the world that destroying the Iron Bank would set rippling out like a stone into a lake.

She listens to them, and they go on and on irrelevantly, questioning her and propositioning her and posturing. She listens, and then she silences them.

Declaring her intentions to cross the Narrow Sea soon and reclaim the Iron Throne from its usurpers. Explaining the War for Dawn looming on the horizon. Assuring them that after she's gone, she's never out of reach, and the Stormborn alliance she's forged across Essos will remain strong or face her wrath all over again. She will fight every war on every front if it is required. She will prevail.

"The Lannisters are deeply in your debt. They've shown no signs of repayment in all these years. They will not pay you now, they will never pay you, because soon they will be ash, I promise you this. So you can support House Targaryen, its laws and all its territories and the battles to come, or you can deny me now. And I will bring your false temple to the ground and redistribute your wealth across both realms."

They don't like that, these bankers, but they're no fools.

The Iron Bank aligns behind the Stormborn flag in the end. Meaning to buy themselves time to plot her downfall, she knows, looking to see if supporting Daenerys Targaryen could turn out more profitable to them than the slave trade. She's unimpressed, definitely does not take them at their word, but is willing to let them prove themselves on a very short leash.

They'll most likely go behind her back. But for now, they'll do.

Before she leaves Braavos behind, she gets what she came for. The Sealord, ruler of the city, elected to his lifelong reign by the highborn within. He's newly elected, this one, since the last Sealord died only a year ago.

"I'm afraid your reign over Braavos will not be as you anticipated, my lord."

She meant to offer him a choice. In her intentions, when she inevitably had to move on Braavos, she'd meant to seek for peace as she has with other cities. Surrender, give up their ways, or burn. But there will be no choice today. He threw away that mercy when an assassin carved at Jorah's face.

Daenerys makes the noble families watch her three children snatch their Sealord in their teeth and toss him between them, rending him to pieces. This is what happens when you come for what's mine. When you hurt what's mine. Let them call her mad and cruel and barbaric. Let them fear her and hate her if they must.

Enough people love her already. If she doesn't prove she can protect them, there's no point in no one hating her.

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Before she flies south, she commands the horde to stay.
Overseen by the Sand Snakes, who'd been eager to ride with the Dothraki on this assault, she sets them to work in the Arsenal shipyard, commissioning a stronger fleet for her armada, intending for the horde to sail straight to the Westeros coast from Braavosi ports once she gives them the call.

When she lands at the Great Pyramid, having flown for days to get back, unable to wait, unable to rest, she moves in from the veranda, pulled impossibly towards her babe. Caked in blood and ash, hair stinking of smoke and charred flesh, she passes Missandei and Jhiqui asleep together in the queen's bed and leans over his crib, finding bright eyes blinking up at her, awake but silent.

She shouldn't touch him like this, taint him, but she can't stop herself from lifting him out of the crib, cradling him to her chest. She rubs his back, buries her nose in his wild black curls to inhale the scent of him, blocking out the disturbing stench that's haunted her for days. She sways softly through the dark room with Jaeh in her arms, just barely humming, feeling the press of him bring her back from that mad haze of ugliness and vicious things.

He opens her heart back up from where it'd turned temporarily to stone.

In the daylight, she has her council brief her on while she was gone. Three months it took the horde to ride the vast distance, pushing as hard as they could without killing their horses. They rode out much before her, of course, both her mercenaries and her horselords, so she was only absent herself a few weeks. And still, things are changed when she's returned.

Most interestingly, most usefully, is the Greyjoys. Serendipity awaiting her return, this brother and sister. Iron Islands royalty and their sprawling fleet with an eager offer of alliance. They'll join her, fight for her, gift her every ship she needs, if she grants the Iron Islands independence when the wars are won.

Only so far as they abide Stormborn laws, she'd warned, coming down from her dais to clasp Yara's arm in pact.

So many western allies driven her way, thanks first to the scorched earth of Cersei Lannister, and now the Kraken's greed. She can't help but feel the gods have finally fallen on their side, so much coming together so well, so quickly, their victories looking more and more secured.

Around the council table they go, discussing the same matters they've been debating for fifteen months.

In private beforehand, Tyrion had gently suggested she leave her lover behind to guard the bay for her, making her grin. Daenerys doesn't trust the Second Sons to such a task. They're mercenaries, after all, and without her eye on them... Well.

Faithful Unsullied to enforce her will and protect her councils, trusted advisors to oversee the councils and elected officials and keep her apprised should things go awry, that's how she'll leave the Bay of Dragons.

She intends to take the Second Sons with her, and all her other mercenary guilds, to bolster the lessened Unsullied numbers, since leaving her lover behind in favor of marriage prospects isn't the issue Tyrion believes. She's taken no lover since Jon Snow. She intends no marriage for political match. Let her Hand toil with his plans. But Daario concerns her. She's made it clear he won't be sharing her bed again, but she suspects the only reason he took it with such good humor is because
he's cocky enough to assume he'll change her mind over time. She knows him and his Sons could become a liability when he comes to accept that won't happen. She'd rather have them kept close, where she can control her disloyal guilds.

She'll take an armada made up of bay ships, Free Cities ships, and the Iron Islands fleet, carrying Dothraki, Unsullied, Second Sons, Windblown, Lost Legion, Free Cities soldiers, Islanders, Dornish, freedmen, and misfits, all drawn together under the Targaryen flag. The Stormborn flag.

The Unsullied have been training the freedmen to fight. She's had the smiths arming them. She's made freed slaves into soldiers so that they may help guard their own cities and protect their own families. A thousand Unsullied to maintain the Bay of Dragons, Lhazareen and Meereenese controlling the sister city councils, Essos natives to preserve the Stormborn Coalition all throughout the Free Cities.

"What of the North?"

Daenerys grows quiet. After a moment, she looks to Varys. "What have your spies returned with?"

"Reports are scattered. The North is dense. Not much verifiable news makes it out of that tundra now that winter has hit. Most of the chatter has proven to be wild rumor. It is possible that they have the Vale and the Riverlands, the mountain clans and the wildlings with them."

"Last I heard, my brother had taken Riverrun," Tyrion finally chimes in. "How has it fallen to the North?"

"I couldn't say."

"A lot of chaos came out of the Battle of the Bastards. Not even most northmen are certain what's actually happened up there in the aftermath."

"It's nearly been a year since House Bolton fell. There's still so much confusion?"

"The North is a wild land. They don't mix with the rest of Westeros."

"And times have never been as they are now."

Varys says, "The Dornish are with us. The Reach is with us, and with it the lion share of the realm's crops, making it the second most valuable resource to hold, behind the ability to guard it. Half the strongholds in Westeros have been abandoned or are running on ghosts. If we had the North with us, there would be no fight at all."

"Would we have the North with us?"

"Perhaps," she murmurs.

If the reports are true and Jon Snow stood victorious after the Battle of the Bastards that reclaimed Winterfell. If he has tight grip of the North. If he's the same man she left behind. If he isn't too badly disenchanted that she's not remotely the same woman he sunk into in that summer meadow.

"Supported by Unsullied, the Dornish will push above them and take Storm's End," she declares, forcing herself to focus, wrapping the conqueror around her. "An easy conquest now that the last Baratheon is dead. Once we control the Stormlands, they'll join the Tyrells and push to Lannisport. Pin the Westerlands between the southern forces and the Greyjoy fleet down from their Iron Islands."

"The Greyjoys would have to retake their islands first for that to happen."
"I have faith in Yara Greyjoy. It shouldn't be too difficult with their uncle leaving it all but
undefended now that he's diverted to King's Landing. When the time comes, she'll have whatever
assistance from me and the dragons she requires."

"Your Grace—"

"I'm quite settled on that aspect, Lord Hand."

"Fine."

"The most important region to safeguard here is the Reach. With winter upon Westeros, likely to be
the harshest in all of memory, the greatest threat to the people beyond the Night King's army will be
famine. We mustn't let these lands become collateral in the conflicts, whatever happens."

"Yes, my queen."

"I'll have the horde come ashore at Storm's End. A smaller fleet of the armada break off at
Dragonstone to meet us when we go north to my home seat. The horde in the Stormlands will
provide support for the Westeros native armies, should they need it, depending on the odds they face
in each stronghold, once we get those numbers and layouts."

"Why not send the horde in entirely? It's what they're good at. Let them sweep through so we lose
less of our soldiers in these smaller battles."

"My Dothraki are not fodder for your knights," she thunders, suddenly furious, suddenly freezing. "I
will not have the Essos peoples that've entrusted me fight Westeros battles. They will fight beside
you, they will help you, because we are in this together. What they will not be is your expendable
resource."  

"Yes, my queen."

With the Greyjoys adding their ships to her ever growing armada, and the Iron Bank presumably to
keep Qarth from acting against her once she's gone, there's no real reason to not set sail. It's taken so
long. So much longer than she'd promised.

It's time to go home.

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Everything has changed. If Drogon hadn't taken her to Westeros, if she hadn't seen what she saw…

Hardhome changed her. It galvanized her, empowered her, rose her up by the power of urgency and
desperation and nothing to lose. Hardhome showed her the end of the world, the end of everything,
so she opened her eyes that day and became something new. A dragon rising out of the ashes once
more, stronger, fiercer, more sure of who she is and what she is doing. And Jon Snow…

The protectiveness she'd felt over him, the desire to be something he believed in, to give him what he
needed, that changed her too. Even if he wouldn't approve of the methods she uses to get there. He
inspired her to be better, to be true to what she's wanted to be.

And all that was before he gave her an impossible child.

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Tristan Rivers, her Golden Company hostage. Over the months, she's had him brought to her
chambers often, had him dine across from her, gaining pieces of the information she wanted through 
word games and instigations and an eventual softening of his distrust and defenses.

The Pentos magister has been scheming for years, tugging at the Company's ropes, as if making her a 
child bride hadn't been enough. They've gone this way and that with his plans, Rivers claimed. There 
was for a time intentions to unite with the Dothraki child bride, make her a puppet queen, use her 
screamers to help them invade Westeros and seat her on the throne as their toy. He didn't use those 
words when he described it, but she knows how men like these think. They meant to settle for her 
baby dragons after the khal's death, during her march through Slaver's Bay. Then that pliant child 
bride became the Dragon Queen.

All the poor magister's schemes went up in smoke. And the Golden Company lost their best chance.

"What is it you and your Company men want, Rivers, at the end of the day?" she'd asked him, late 
one night over wine and torchlight, her son snoring softly in her arms at the table, Kovarro silent by 
the archway. "What do you truly want?"

"To go home, Your Grace."

"I can take you home. Why fight me?"

"The Company won't go against the Iron Bank."

"They're only bankers. Without you, they have nothing."

"They have all the gold in the world."

Daenerys simply smiled a conqueror's smile and sat back in her chair. "Gold melts as easily as men 
under dragonfire."

She doesn't tell him of the Dragon Wrath. Nor that the bankers have revoked the Sealord's contract 
and invested in her instead. Not yet. But she brings him up on deck during their voyage. She leans 
 languidly against the ship's rail, wind blowing her hair wild behind her, and tells the outlaw, "Look 
to the west, Captain Rivers. You'll see home soon enough."

It's nothing to do with kindness. She intends to make him a believer. A Stormborn loyalist, slowly 
but surely. Once he's devout, she'll send him back to sway the Golden Company to her side.

They sail west to Sunspear first, installing a strong contingent in Dorne, and a good portion of the 
freedmen that chose to come with their Mhysa to a strange new world, leaving them off where they'll 
be most insulated from the war efforts in the north. Hundreds of freedmen families she must be sure 
are taken care of.

She sets a dozen different pieces on the board into action. Separate paths meant to converge, if all 
goes well. She sends emissaries on errands across every corner of the continent. She wants answers. 
She needs to lay invitations and ultimatums at the doors of enemies and potential allies. Most of all, 
she needs news from the North.

Moving up the Narrow Sea with the queen's contingent of her armada, Daenerys lands in 
Dragonstone with her council and her court and her children, all four of them. She walks through the 
land she was born on. She reclaims the ancient Targaryen fortress that's been pilfered and deserted 
by Baratheons. She stands at the veranda of the dark stone war room and watches the raging storm 
throw whitecaps against the jagged rocks of her island.
Her first night home in all her life and lightning flashes through the black night, booming with thunder and sharp cracks as the rain sleets furiously down to the violent sea below. A night like this, she was born. She doesn't know if it's validation of her efforts, the earth encouraging her Stormborn Coalition, or a dire omen.

Has she triumphed so, come all this way at last, just to face her downfall? To see everything she's built come rapidly undone?

Will she never see him again?

And worse…

*What if the Night King isn't the coming darkness,* she wonders, after the Red Priestess leaves her alone, prophecies echoing in the stormy silence. *What if you are?*
Chapter 8

We Could Meet Again Somewhere Far From Here

He comes to her a king in Dragonstone.

Truthfully, she half expected to never see him again. A part of her was certain it wouldn't be so, convinced something she wanted so badly would never come to her, because everything good she grasps for turns to poison in her hand. She knew he was coming, but still can't quite believe it was him they spoke of until she lays eyes on him for herself.

The towering silver doors to the great hall creaking open, her Lord Commander is led in behind the Dothraki, Davos at his side. Not her Lord Commander anymore. Not just a Lord Commander. King in the North. Pride and insecurity war for prominence within her by that thought.

But the sight of him…

Relief sings through her at the sight of him, something strange and visceral. It's been so long. So long.

He looks up at her on the throne in reserved amazement, feet bringing him forward in his daze even when the Dothraki stop. She gets lost in those complicated eyes for a moment, breathless, doesn't know if the coldness she'd tried to wrap around herself is shattered, if they can see it on her face. She tries to be queen, but she fears the truth is laid bare for everyone to find.

"Your Grace…"

Missandei's menacing herald of her titles cuts through his disquieted faltering, goes on and on through the cavernous room, and she suppresses an ungenerous spike of irritation, impatience, plagued by the itch to fidget on her throne. To desert it entirely. If she were another woman, if she were just a girl, she could fling herself from the uncomfortable stone throne and run to him. Jump at him like her body wants to. As her heart wants…

But she's not a girl, and he's not a boy, and that's not an option.

She's wanted to get back to him for so long, and now that he's here, she doesn't know what to do with him. How to be here.

Echoes in her mind, asking him to come back to Meereen with her, knowing he would refuse.

The man standing before her now looks like a different man than the one in her memory. Those wild curls her son inherited, those curls she'd loved twisting into her fingers, are tied back tight now, making his scarred face seem harsher, older, even more grim. He wears a leather jerkin over his wool sleeves and the steel gorget at his collar bears engravings of the Stark sigil wolf.

It makes her think of Jaehaerys. She has the sudden thought of Westerosi naming him Snow. Her son is not Snow or Sand or Stone. Her son is Targaryen and Stark. When he grows, he'll bear the dragon and the wolf sigils of his Houses. Gods help anyone that tries to keep him from those rights.
He refuses to bend the knee, for the sake of northern independence, for the people that named him king. But he respects her, is in awe of her, needs her as an ally. He can't let what he feels for her change his choices. Their time together after Hardhome is like a dream now, something distant and unreachable, hazy at the edges in his memory. As if it couldn't possibly have been real.

Hating himself, he watches the innocent happiness in her bright eyes dim, souring to mistrust with his three words. "I have not." I cannot. She must understand.

"Then why have you come?"

"To see you. To be allies."

"Your kingdom is in open rebellion."

Which is when the hurt surprise at her edge of hostility turns to anger, flaring up in him, straightening his spine. His face twists and he takes a brash step forward. "You told me to take Winterfell. You wanted me to unite the North."

"I did."

"Aye, but in your name, right?"

"My name or yours, does it matter?"

"Apparently," he growls, jaw locked. In a quieter voice, "I didn't think it would, but that's probably why they all call me a northern fool."

He's starting to get resentful, like he misjudged her, and now he's thinking the worst of her, seeing that she's still focused on this war with the Lannisters instead of what really matters, even after what she'd seen Beyond the Wall. She was there. She knows. She swore to return and fight beside him against the Night King. Now she's here, fixated on a meaningless throne. Wasting time on making people bow to her, as if that could ever be important when they're facing extinction.

His Hand and hers bandy back and forth about what it matters for, what he should do, but he's looking at her and she's looking at him and nothing else is in focus. He wants to go back to that meadow. Back to the shack in the snow. He was only a man, she was only a woman, and she spoke of such great things. She spoke as a heroine. She tended his wounds and she played with Ghost and she smiled beautifully and the world outside didn't exist. She was a miracle he couldn't fathom. Someone he thought he might love.

"I don't know you," he realizes darkly, unhappily, voice thickened with it. Northern fool indeed. Has he been so wrong?

"What does that mean?" she bites archly, silencing those around them.

"Word of what you've done to Essos has spread."

"What I've done?" Archer still. Sharp enough to cut.

"How many thousands of people have you killed, Daenerys? How many ruined lives and destroyed lands did you leave behind? And you expect me to give you my homeland?"

She flinches. Shock reverberates through the room, at the gall of his disgusted accusation or the reaction it pulls from her, he wouldn't know. He tries to hold to his anger, his stupid suicidal anger, but the second he sees the words touch her, he wants to go back a moment, to snatch the words back
before they reach her. He's wounded her. That wasn't what he meant to do here. He doesn't even know if half of what Littlefinger has been telling them is true.

When the man standing at the bottom of her stone steps witnesses the stricken look cross her lush features before it smooths away behind the imposing face of the Dragon Queen, his sneer says it all. Focus swinging from his queen to Jon, he lifts a dagger from his belt and flips it into a ready grip. He takes an intent step in the same motion and Jon reaches instinctively for his sword hilt.

"Daario," she warns. Threat implicit in her cold tone.

His lanky body loosens, falling back against the wall where he'd been, meant to be laziness, but the smirk he levels at Jon is deadly and promising.

"Queen Daenerys and her armies killed many men, it's true," Tyrion tells them, venturing back into the silent tension, trying to diffuse things. "Soldiers and slaveholders that stood against her."

"That's all. Because of course innocents are never collateral to war."

"Our queen decided to end the evil of slavery. When our queen decides to do something, she does not back down. I'm quite uncertain that she knows giving up is an option." He stops to give a nervous chuckle, a half grin no one shares, everybody too busy glaring at each other. "There is always collateral to war, Lord Snow. What of the collateral to your wars?"

"I haven't set fire to an entire continent."

"Neither has she."

"Peace requires justice," Missandei says suddenly, surprisingly, uncharacteristic of the timid girl to wade in. Echoing words she'd heard the Mother of Dragons thunder against men who would call her irrational. "Justice requires violence. With no justice, there is no peace, only order. Many of us will welcome violence if it brings some of us peace."

"Speaking as a slave our queen freed," Daario drawls, still eyeing Jon Snow over. Measuring the man. Most likely planning a nice murder, quiet and convenient.

It worries her. But if she didn't believe he would obey her in this, she would send him away. You will not touch him, she had commanded when he joked of his rival setting sail for Dragonstone.

"Is that how the Free Cities feel?" Davos wonders.

"The Free Cities were only free for the rich," Daenerys scolds. "Now they are free for all. I don't much care for the voices who find that unfortunate."

"You northerners are awfully ungrateful," Daario notes, toying with his blade tip. "An army of dead men at your door and she's brought you three fire breathing dragons and two hundred thousand warriors to fight them. All this for you, to protect you, and you spit in her face."

"What do you have to do with it?" Jon demands, losing his temper again, turning towards the mercenary with belligerence.

"People, people, please," Tyrion interjects again. "We're all friends here."

"We're not friends," he rasps.
She's silent, just raising a brow at his disdain, his lack of faith in her, like he doesn't really know her. It stings, but she'd never wanted to feel this way to begin with. To let him work himself under her skin in a way that makes her feel needy for his appreciation, make her ashamed that he'd think lowly of her. As if she'd done something to warrant it. As if there must be something flawed in her, if he can't see honor in her, or reason in what she's done. She wants him to respect her, to admire her, to think well of her because his qualities of character are those she utmost values.

She wants that, but it rankles that she would.

He seems to find her lacking.

Little does he know, she's already sent a fleet of Dothraki with the Tattered Prince and his Windblown to the Wall to bolster his forces there. The first step in a campaign she hasn't figured out how to offense yet. She would tell him, had meant to have him send ravens to his North today to clear them a path when they reach White Harbor, but pride and spite hold her tongue. Freeze her in her throne.

The demand to bend the knee to her was only formality for the sake of her supporters and future subjects. She can't have every would be king thinking she'll let them grab for a crown because of the way she's handled the King in the North. She realizes her mistake now, watching Jon's face, in assuming he would understand that without it needing to be said.

And perhaps it was her advisors in her ear, her insecurity at what they'd think of her and Jon Snow should she not make the demand. What some of them already suspect. She will not have her court believing she can be seduced so easily. And controlled.

"What happened to being together in this?" he asks her, blocking out the rest of the room, half pleading, half accusing.

Descending the dais, she's pulled inexorably towards him, impassioned, bitterly offended, fierce as she explains, "We need Westeros united if we're going to win this war, Jon Snow. We need the Lannister forces and all of their banners added to our own. We need security while we focus our fights to the north. One front. I will fight for you. I will fight beside you and we will destroy the Night King and his dead. But I do not intend to lose everything in such a fight, and if we go up against them with only what we have now, that is what will happen. My men will be slaughtered. My dragons will fall. If we destroy them, we will come out at Dawn barely standing and with nothing left to go on with. That cannot happen."

How many times has she imagined this reunion?

What's worse, she doesn't know who she blames for ruining it, him or herself.

Tyrion follows behind her down the dark corridor, struggling to keep pace with her fuming stride. "You said nothing of Jaehaerys. Are you intending to keep him secret, even from his— Even from Jon Snow?"

"I did not lie to Jon Snow."

"Technically. You also did not mention his—"

"Tyrion," she cuts in warningly, whirling around to bring him up short. She takes a breath and repairs her composure. They stand at an intersection of corridors. She twists to make certain they are alone, but for her guards. Softly, reluctantly, she says, "I do not intend to keep him from his son. I do
Perhaps it would've fallen from her tongue impulsively, a failing of her control. But then he'd said what he came to say, slipped in with his aggravation, about having no time, going to die, a land of graveyards, must focus on the war. She wonders now if he should know at all. He hated the idea of ever fathering a bastard. Did he even want a child? Would Jaeh be a burden to him? Would she?

Doubt creeps in, forcing her to rethink how well she felt she knew him once.

*He thinks I'm a monster.*

Jon finds her on the stone path, watching her dragons play across the sunset sky. She's as beautiful as the breathtaking scenery. The orange sky, the spiking stone of the island cliffs, the powerful roil of the ocean below, her magical beasts dancing through the clouds. His eyes get stuck on her.

Half of him feels like it knows her, has *faith* in her, but everything else is telling him to be wary. She said she wanted to protect people. She said she wanted to *save them*. But she went back and waged bloody war. She took half of Essos with fire and blood. She *conquered*. Like Aegon. How many did she burn for refusing to bow to her? How many died because they were fighting for their home? They say she was freeing slaves, but does that outweigh the destruction it took to get there? And was that really what she was doing? She was amassing power.

More power than this world has seen in centuries.

If she's not their savior, she's their doom.

*You were so sure of her. You were so sure you loved her.* But did he? Truly? He saw the best parts of her and he fell in love with them, or the idea of her, but did he ever see *all* of her? Did he see the most important parts of her?

She did as she said she would. He can't deny that. She came back to him with as much of a fighting force against the dead as she could. She says she's still determined to stop the Night King and he believes her. He really does. But…

No one person should hold so much power in their hands, should they? Especially not someone so eager for bloodshed.

The North will never fight against her. They know they'd be slaughtered. But they don't want to bow down to her and that should count for something. *Shouldn't* it?

A condition of gaining the North's support after the Battle of the Bastards and beyond was promising he wouldn't be the Dragon Queen's dog, as they put it. That he would ensure their alliance when she returned would be equal, that independence for the North was the only way to move forward.

"Dany…"

She doesn't turn when he comes down to her. Her body is stiff, perfectly straight spine and squared shoulders and raised chin, completely the queen. Her face is a cool smooth carving of stone, looking ahead, aware of him but not sparing him her focus. It makes him feel small. It makes him not know what to do with his own body. She says, "How are the Mother's Men?"

"They've done well in the North. Better than I'd worried. We've used the wildlings on the Wall. I've kept your men close to Winterfell."
"I meant for them to make it to you sooner. To help you in your first battle."

"I know. I'm grateful."

"Are you?" she counters, still toneless. Still won't look at him.

Frustration pulls his feet across the stone, pushing closer. "I can't bend the knee. You must understand. The northerners don't know you. They won't stand by me if I hand the North over to a foreign invader, no matter how I try to explain it. You saw what happened with the Night's Watch."

"I don't require you to bend the knee," she says. Startling him.

His stance shifts, brooding frown coming apart, taken aback. "What?"

"Jon," she sighs, ice dissolving into patience, and finally faces him. "I know you. I know your heart, I know what you're made of. I know that you will not betray me, as I would not betray you. I am not a conqueror for power. I require power to protect people. To right what is wrong in this awful world. The only way you get justice here is by demanding it. Forcing it. That's all I've ever been after. You... You are almost all that a king should be."

He's moved. Warmed, electrified. That suffocating tightness in his chest gets its first crack and he takes a breath. He smiles, teases, "Almost?"

"Yes, well, you're too forgiving for my taste, but I work with what I have. And your ambition needs stoking. You'll have to learn to aim higher, my love."

Her tone is casual, just the barest hint of playful. He nearly misses it as she walks by, leaving him turning with her, leaving him there looking after her. He's rooted in place.

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They make love in the grass by the waterfall.

In the meadow, trampling wildflowers.

In the dragon's cave, pinned to the wall, and on the hard ground, his back to the stone wall as she straddles him.

Swimming, bathing. She lays out on a rock, feet dangling in the water, eyes shut against the sun. He surfaces to wrap his hands around her ankle and the back of her knee and tug her down off the rock. She yelps as she falls in, crushed against his body, circled in his arms. He pushes her back into the side of the rock when he kisses her. It's playful, until it's not, until it's savage.

He's never wanted something as wildly or purely as he wants her.

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Jon comes to her that night.

He needs a chance to talk with her openly, alone, without worrying after his words the way he must when their people have their eyes on them. At her door is a Dothraki guard and an Unsullied on either side. He expects suspicion, hostility, weapons barring his path, but they let him by. Not a flicker in their bored expressions.

Did she make sure I was welcome? he wonders, feeling his heart in his throat suddenly.
It's been so long since they said goodbye. He made it home to Winterfell. He reunited the North under one banner. He mourned Ygritte and longed for Dany. But the more he heard of Essos, the more he doubted himself. The things he heard…

All those horrors.

He doesn't know her, not like he thought, but he thinks he has a great deal of her measure. He must. Enough of it. When he starts to doubt her good heart, he remembers the sight of her surrounded by fire, little Willa in her arms, wights all around. Recalls the look on her face when she saw him on his knees and bleeding and the men that'd betrayed him.

His knuckles rap on the inner door, holding his breath. Her muffled voice, "Enter," he makes out. Coming into her chambers, his eyes find her standing over a desk by the glowing hearth, rifling through scattered parchments, her ornate robe clasped by a dragon pin, her silver waves loose. She looks pleased to see him, but nervous. She hides it by refocusing on the reports and letters she'd been poring over.

It's strange to see her like this, a queen surrounded by her subjects in her castle. Stranger still to see her sitting on that massive stone throne. Covered up with rich gowns and coats like a queen should be. He'd only ever seen in her ragged things, looking wild. A ruined white silk, burnt borrowed leathers, a grimy tunic and breeches too big for her. And once, just once, one of Sansa's dresses. She's never not unearthly gorgeous, but she's less touchable like this.

Before he can find his voice, she announces, "Dornish and Unsullied have taken the Stormlands. Joined with the Tyrell army, they're marching to the Westerlands. From the west coast, the Greyjoy fleet will batter Lannisport once they make it up the Sunset Sea. I've called the Dothraki from Braavos. They sailed a week ago, heading to Storm's End. They'll be based out of the Stormlands for now. Do you need me to divert any of their ships to White Harbor?"

"Don't do that," he answers, too quick, too vehement. Here he goes insulting her again when she's offering him … everything. But getting the northmen to accept an army of Targaryen eunuchs marching through their territories was impossible enough. He doesn't want a horde of barbarians coming ashore and causing Gods know what carnage, especially not when he's so far away, stuck here on this island.

When she looks over at him, the caution she'd held has hardened. She'd been willing to start lowering her guard and he's pushed it up again. "I suppose you won't need the support anyway. My fighters will be keeping our enemies too busy to worry about you."

"They're not my enemies."

This flares fire up in her so quick, so suddenly, he almost steps back when she whirls on him. "The Lannisters killed your family. Tortured them."

"Aye, and if I could afford revenge, it's all I'd want. But that doesn't matter now. The Night King is my only enemy now. All that matters is the living and the dead and the fight between them. You're wasting time and losing men we'll need in the Great War with this battling over thrones."

"You still think this is about a throne?"

"Isn't it?"

"I've told you—"

"Aye, you've told me. But is it the truth? You may believe it to be, but from where I'm standing, you
started this. You waged war on Cersei Lannister. You don't know that their armies would've gone after us if you'd brought your people straight to the North like I thought you would. Like you said you would."

"I didn't say that."

"You made it seem," he argues, not buying her equivocating.

"Half of my forces are Westeros Houses that only aligned with me because they believed I could bring justice to Cersei Lannister," she snaps. Her body has moved into his space of its own accord, her anger distracting her as his does him. "They want her dead. They want to take everything from her. Very few of them actually believe what I tell them about the Others. If I'd commanded them to the Wall, having won them no victories, having left the Lannisters their crown, they wouldn't have followed."

"You're their queen."

"You're not listening to me." She realizes how close they've come then, and she wrenches herself away, turning from him. She returns to the desk and picks up her wine. "Thirty thousand Dornish fighters. Forty thousand of the Tyrell army. Seven hundred Greyjoy longships and seventeen thousand ironborn. If I had sailed north to fight monsters they don't believe in, I would not have their numbers. It's not enough even with them. We need all of Westeros united. We don't know how many the Night King commands. And one undead is worth how many of ours? They can go forever, never tiring, never wounding. Every man they kill becomes theirs. You said that, Jon. You said we need more."

"But you're not gonna get more if you kill them all."

"That's why we must crush them quickly. The less extended this fighting becomes, the less men we lose on both sides."

Trying to rein his frustration, he sighs. "What is it you mean to do? Really?"

"I mean to cut King's Landing from every direction. The Lannisters can hole up in their stolen capital, but they'll have no allies, no resources, no recourse. My people are taking them from the south and the west. But it has to be from above and below and every side. I need to know you'll be with me. I need to know your North and Riverlands are part of my noose."

"Aye, Dany, I'm with you," he rasps, without thought, lost in her fervent eyes. He's not sure about it, he's not happy about it, but it's what it is. He told himself he could face the Dragon Queen and make his decisions apart from what she makes him feel. But he can't. He won't hand over his people, he won't make choices for them he doesn't believe is best for them, but he knows he also won't truly go against her.

*I'm afraid I may always be with you. No matter what you do.*

"Varys tells me your Riverlands army is fifteen thousand strong. Is that true?"

"At last count."

"How is it you came to claim the Riverlands?" she asks, angling in a way that makes her more open to him, more encouraging for him to be near.

"I didn't set out for that. My sister's uncle sent for aid. He was made hostage in his own home by Lannisters and Freys. The Knights of the Vale were determined to help, ruled by Sansa's boy cousin
in the Eyrie who wanted to save his uncle. Since they pulled us through the Battle for Winterfell, I felt obliged. Since the Frey heirs were slaughtered, the Crossing at the Twins was left unmanned. So we crossed."

"Yes, the Frey massacre. All that's said of it is winter came for House Frey. That wasn't you?" She makes it a question, but it's clear she knows it wasn't. She knows he wouldn't do something that way, with no honor, with deception. That's more something she would do.

"All I know is it was done in the Stark name."

"And so you crossed," she prompts, bringing her wine to her lips, eyes on his.

"Aye, and we weren't very smart about it," he admits. "The Riverrun forces raised the bridges and lowered the gates and holed themselves up in the castle before we reached them. Refused to meet us in battle."

"Of course they did."

"We didn't have enough siege weapons. They could've held out that way for months. But there would've been no need for that, because reinforcements marched on us from the south, Lannisters out of Casterly Rock. We'd likely not have succeeded if not for your dragon."

She'd begun rounding the desk towards the table under the stone carved window, meaning to sit. At his words, she stops cold. Turns back to look at him, surprised, bewildered. "What?"

He only frowns at her, head cocked. "Drogon."

Daenerys walks step by step back to him. "Drogon came back to you?"

Now Jon's just as confused as she seems. "He came down from the sky out of nowhere as we were in the thick of the third battle," he says. "He pushed them back enough for us to get the higher ground and surround them. When we'd won and the men behind the walls wouldn't surrender, he breathed fire over the castle battlements and battered down the barricade for us when he landed." If the northerners and mountain men hadn't seen her beast in action above them, they might've never begun believing what Jon had been telling them all along. About Daenerys, about the Night King. Just how many would be following him if not for that battle? "We wouldn't have taken the Riverlands if not for him."

She's growing more and more alarmed the more he speaks, and eventually his confusion becomes dread. It takes awhile, but he gets it.

"You didn't send him?"

She tears her gaze away, turns her head to hide her thoughts.

He takes a step in her direction. "He came on his own? He decided to do that on his own? He laid waste to that army," he realizes. Horrorstruck.

In a small voice, back still turned, Dany asks, "Did he attack your men?"

"No. He went after the Lannisters and Freys. Only the Lannisters and Freys."

"He knows who our enemies are," is all she replies.

It should be a reassurance, but it's not. It's … terrifying. Seeing Drogon in action, presumably at Jon's
beckoning, presumably a gift he'd earned of the last Targaryen, solidified his hold on the North and gained him more loyal allies beyond. He'd let them believe it because he needed them to. But he had no collar on her beast. He had no idea what it was doing.

What else are her dragons up to while she's not looking? How far would they go? And just how intelligent are these beasts of hers? What kind of mental magic do they seem to possess? No one knows why they do what they do, not even their mother apparently. Where does it end?

"Dany—"

Something clatters in the other room. Her bedchamber. They both jerk towards the sound, eyes on the shut door. The hand he'd reached for her stops in the air, shy of her shoulder, and then it falls. When she looks back to him, there's a hint of panic flashing through her face before she withdraws, hands clasped, almost back to the regal queen that had sat above him that first day in the great hall.

He realizes…

_Someone is in there._

She's taken another lover.

Of course she has.

Jon steps back, dropping his head, trying to control his expression. Awkward and injured and ashamed of himself for it. Of course she's not alone. It's been nearly two years since they said goodbye. She's a queen. She's … magnificent. Men have probably crossed the continents to be with her. Did he? No. That was her. She's crossed continents. She's brought him armies and dragons and the steel will of a battle ready conqueror. She's done so much for him, for this fight he brought to her, and he's given her nothing. He can give her nothing.

Northmen call him king for now, but he's just a bastard.

He starts to turn.

"Jon, wait," she calls, lurching after him. Reaching for his hand, catching it quick before he can leave her. But as soon as he stills, she pulls away from the touch, pulls into herself again, looking away from him. "I…"

So she wants to say something. Badly. He sees that. Her lips part, regretful, but she shakes it off. She doesn't say it. He can't tell if he's relieved or disappointed.

"Sleep well, Your Grace."

Once, not so long ago, a remarkable woman fell out of the sky into his arms and everything changed. She'd inspired him, galvanized him, given him hope in this fight where he was once resigned to die. He'll never be able to pay her back for that, however this all turns out.

He should have never wanted more than that.

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She watches him for days, from afar, from above.

_Drogon is protecting you_, she realizes, staring at Jon. She'd known when he gave her to Jon in the first place, when he dragged her back to him when he needed them, but she hadn't really understood
how far that went. Until now. He's taken him under his wing. Perhaps she would convince herself it's for the sake of her feelings for Jon Snow, but this was happening before she knew him. This isn't for her. This is about Jon.

Only blood of the dragon responds that way to blood of the dragon.

Drogon, drawn by blood. She didn't even notice he was gone.

He must have some Targaryen in him, this Jon Snow, however little or however much. It concerns her. Not because they could be swayed by Jon, though that's an uncomfortable consideration, that anyone could take her children from her, not by violence but by choice. As if they might choose to abandon her for another. But because of the unknowing.

There are still plenty of people in the world with just a touch of Targaryen in them. If that's all it takes for such an extreme reaction from her dragons, they could all be in grave danger.
Chapter 9

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She's The Beast In Your Bones

Daenerys storms from the war room with barely held dignity, voices rising and falling in her wake, growing distant as the doors fall shut and she keeps going. Let them argue amongst themselves for awhile. She's been liking all of them less and less in recent days. Especially the ones that insist on reminding her of all that she's already very aware of.

Especially when it comes to Jon.

She saw it in their faces in the great hall that day. She knows what they'd all been thinking. This is who you love? This is the father of your son? This is who you've done all that for? He doesn't love you. He doesn't think well of you.

She can't confidently tell them they're wrong. But she hates them for it.

And Daario. Poor Daario. He doesn't understand it. She wishes she could explain. But how can she without telling him too much? Without making him see what it was like for her in Hardhome, in Castle Black, in that hillside ruin, in that meadow paradise, and all the weeks on the roadside going north. It's not one thing. It's thousands. It's everything. It's just Jon Snow.

"If I'd known you prefer your lover judge and sneer over you," he'd said, "I'd have taken different tactics to seduce you."

She'd almost slapped him. But that would've been childish, and unfair, because he's right. That's what he's seen so far of the man he's watched her pine for. How can she blame him for being confused or insulted?

What's obvious to them all, what she can't ignore, is that she thinks better of Jon Snow than he does her. And with that in mind, she has to wonder if he ever really saw her at all. If he actually cared about her, as she felt he did. Perhaps it was someone else he was loving when he looked at her. Perhaps he'd built a fantasy out of her from that, and now he's disappointed, made bitter from the fracture of that illusion.

If she wanted to, if she decided that was what she was going to do, how could she go about making him love the real Dany?

Is that even something she should go after?

As if her thoughts lure him to her, the queen rounds a corridor corner and nearly collides with the brooding King in the North. He steps back fast to avoid her, their eyes catching awkwardly, neither knowing what to say.

"Are you having luck in the mines?" she finally settles on.

"Aye, some. It's coming along."

She's tempted to leave it at that. To drop her chin and move past him and not say what she should say. What she should've said the second he landed on her island, what she owes to him, which her pride and her injured feelings stopped her from. Every day she thinks of starting it right, going to
him, explaining. Every night she berates herself for her weakness when she fails.

It's just that … the way he looks at her is already upsetting. She doesn't want to learn the sight of his face when he knows the truth. How it would change everything. Or worse … it would change nothing for him.

But she is queen. She is not a coward.

"Jon," she begins, softer than she intends, hesitant, "There is something I've needed to discuss with you. About my time in Essos. When you have—"

"There you are," Daario calls, pulling them apart, silencing her. The mercenary comes up behind her, chasing her leisurely from the council meeting. He stops at her side, turned to her, giving the impression of wedging between them without actually being so blatant as to put his body in front of hers.

Daenerys deflates from her bracing, pulls back behind the queen's cool mask. She can't bring it up now. Jon's already stiffened, turning defensive. "Daario," she acknowledges.

With a knowing smirk, he never takes his eyes off Jon, mentioning, "If you hoped they'd settle their differences without you, you gave them too much credit."

"I'm not interested in their differences. I've heard what each has to say."

"Tyrion thought you needed a respite from things that displease you." He spares just a beat to let that settle before quipping, "The northern fool hasn't been keeping that from you, has he?"

"Again I'd ask what is it to do with you?" Jon snaps gruffly before she can chide her mercenary. Like a wolf, his fur bristles fast. And when it happens, he leaves behind the solemn quiet of his character with jarring suddenness.

Daario angles his body gamely to the king's, his shoulder blocking her. His tone stays easy like his smile, but only a true fool would mistake his intentions. "Those of us that serve our queen keep her interests utmost in mind. That's what is it to do with me, dog."

"Enough," she cuts in, but the word doesn't get out before Jon's caught him by the vest and spun together. He slams him into the wall, an almost soundless growl vibrating in his chest, she can tell, his teeth gritted, jaw locked, violence contained tightly. Daario only grins, completely loose within his grasp, victorious.

He's taunting you, you roughneck, she wants to say, and frustration builds and brims in her as she bites her tongue. You sweet fool. Don't play his game. You're no good at it.

Because she doesn't know the right thing to say to Jon Snow to make him back down without humiliating him or making him think she's chosen sides, she simply ignores him. She focuses on her Second Sons commander instead. "Is there something particular you needed from me, Daario?"

Gladly taking her cue, he ignores Jon too, still pinned by the man. "Raven came."

A coolly raised eyebrow comes. "You should have started with that."

"Where's the fun?"

She takes it from him when he offers it out. Reads the hastily scrawled missive, face turning to stone. Blood rising for battle. Eyes downcast, she says distractedly, "The Silverhill offensive is in position. I
Then walks away without worrying about their precarious predicament.

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Jon stares after her, forgetting what made him put his hands on her mercenary in the first place, though not the hostility that's surging in him. In stilted motions, he retracts his grip and steps back, watching him tug his vest straight. The second he lost his temper and lashed out, he saw the glimmer in the man's eyes and got the feeling he'd just lost something. A game he wasn't aware to be playing. But it was instinct. It'd happened before he knew he was moving, pushed by that unwarranted fierceness of his dislike for the queen's eastern sellsword.

He shouldn't feel this possessive over her. He has no right. Not with who she is, not with who he is. Reluctantly, he questions, "What did she mean by that?"

Daario flashes him another grating grin. "Come and see."

When he starts unhurriedly after her, Jon tells himself not to follow, but his feet take him forward. Down the corridors, out onto the parapet, they watch her handmaiden wrap a coarse coat onto her, clasping at the neck, then she climbs Drogon's wing and the beast takes flight.

"A true queen leads the charge," is all her mercenary says, and Jon finds his teeth grinding at the intimate pride in his voice from some reason.

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"Lord Varys," she'd said the day after Jon came to her chambers. "Is there a reason I had no word of a dragon rampaging through the Riverlands when King Snow marched on Riverrun?"

"As I've explained, Your Grace, it was quite difficult getting solid intelligence out of the North while it was in so much turmoil these last years. And across such a vast distance is even harder. Before we left Meereen, I'd only just received a distant rumor about the Riverlands coming under the North's banner, nothing of any detail."

"And when we docked in Sunspear?"

"More rumors, but those were even less substantiated. Most Westerosi dismiss such things outright. Fantastical lies told by bragart soldiers, passed to giggling whores and onto more sensible ears after that, who let them die. I assumed panicked stories of a dragon in Jon Snow's warfare were imaginative elaborations on the talk of the North having support from Queen Daenerys across the sea."

"I still should have known."

"Your Grace, if I came to you with every wild story I must sort through, you'd have no time left to do anything else. It's my job to sort, so that I may come to you with only what I have reliable evidence to conclude is worth your time."

"I appreciate that. But next talk you hear of dragons, however fanciful, you bring it to me. I must hear it."

"If you wish."
"They say she's granted the Iron Islands their independence once the wars are won on the contingency that they offer their banner if she calls."

"Aye, but the Iron Islands are of no further use to her but for their fleet. They're not the vastness of the North. Or the political keys of the Vale or the Riverlands. I was a fool for thinking I could walk this line."

Davos follows after him up the cliff steps, making their way back to the imposing keep that towers above. "And what line would that be exactly?" he counters knowingly, bringing Jon to a stop.

"For a time, I had every intention of pledging myself to Daenerys. I'd already broken so many of my Night's Watch vows. Why stay neutral to the strife of the kingdoms when supporting her might save us all from the Long Night? And clinging to the remnants of my oath would leave us all at the Night King's mercy?"

"Then you were named King in the North."

"Aye," Jon sighs. "I never expected things to work out the way they have. I didn't even think the northern lords would lend their banners to protecting us all, never mind raising me up to lead them. Entrusting me with that duty."

I didn't prepare for coming to her as an equal. I don't know how to navigate it.

"And falling under the Targaryen flag like all those that came before you would be betraying that duty?" he wonders.

"If she keeps to who she says she is, it would be gaining them protection. Bringing peace to the realm. I can't think of any better way to serve my home." He looks off into the morning sky, feeling even more beaten than usual. "They'd view it as a betrayal either way."

If she keeps to who she says she is. That's the fear. If she keeps to who I believe she is. But can he trust in that?

This dilemma is all pointless, he suspects.

What choice does he really have?

"The North needs allies in the fight ahead," Tyrion had told him once he'd cornered him on the cliff. "It also needs resources to last through the winter. The lords don't like the idea of bowing to a Targaryen again, or a foreign invader and her savages, or a woman, let's be honest. But how well will they really do on their own? Even without the Others to worry about, the recent wars have left the northern kingdoms the most decimated. Good men gone, harvests wasted and burned and now frostbitten, what little wealth they'd ever had used up in the campaigns. Do the right thing by your people, Jon Snow. Swear your sword to our queen. Join us. Become one of the most important pieces of the Stormborn Coalition."

And didn't that sound like a good dream?

Yet like the dream of her, he can't bring himself to believe it could be real. Life is nothing like what she's shown him. What she offers.

Half the men that've ever heard him speak of her think he's been bewitched. Seduced by a mad queen, a foreign whore, a murderous witch. He's spent the last years convincing them all that she's
their savior. Defending her through every new horror story the east brought them. His sister warned him off this visit altogether. She thinks his judgment can't be trusted when it comes to Daenerys Targaryen.

And she's right.

Jon believes in her still, no matter what he's heard, no matter what she's done. But it's that belief, it's that overpowering want and willingness to bow to her, let her take the weight from his shoulders and lead them all into a new dawn, that makes him hold himself back. If he didn't believe in it so strongly, if it wasn't so tempting, he most likely would've already given into her without a second thought. No one can deny she's their best hope, whatever her methods. He must tread so carefully because he can't be certain he's acting unselfishly.

"It's about survival," Davos reminds him.

"It's my job to overlook their pride," he agrees. "But if I bend the knee and give her the North, I relinquish my rule over them. That means if she makes a decision to use us in a way I can't abide, I'd have no power to stand between the queen and my home. After everything we've been through with all these royals…"

"Her Hand tells me Lord Baelish's reports of the anarchy in Essos were greatly exaggerated and misinterpreted."

"I'm shocked," Jon deadpans.

"My point is, as he tells it, she left more than half the Free Cities their sovereignty. She brought them into this Stormborn Coalition of theirs, but it seems that only extends to alliances and trade agreements and a promise of protection should they need it. Many of the states she clashed with across the sea gained peace and independence simply by each arranging their own covenants. Swearing to aid where they can and heed the laws her interconnections laid forth."

"Meaning they're under a boot heel, Davos, whatever titles they retain."

"Maybe." But then he persists, "She's molded the Lhazareen into diplomats and paired them with Unsullied to be the brute strength behind them. She's taken Ghiscari and leveled the gap in their classes. She's trained them into soldiers for themselves, so they won't be enslaved again, if Lord Tyrion is believed. She enticed free islanders under her flag with only her vision for the future and their gratitude for guarding them against the slavers that spent centuries stealing their peoples."

"Just what she said she'd do," Jon sighs, admiring despite himself.

"She forced Volantis to bow when they sought to destroy her, without true battle, and now commands their military. I think I recall the number somewhere at thirty thousand soldiers and a hundred warships in their navy. The troops were heavily pared from the outlaw of slavery though, since so many of the Volantene lower caste fighters weren't enlisted by choice, and a chunk of the fleet was destroyed. Still, quite an asset overall. The city has been reserved some of that might, but she absorbed a good deal. She converged a dozen mercenary guilds into her armies. She conquered the Dothraki for their strength in this war and quelled their raiding and terrorizing."

"She doesn't use them to raid and terrorize?"

"Maybe," Davos says again, and his matter of fact tone grates, his neutrality as he essentially extols her accomplishments making it both harder for Jon to justify his reservations and clearer to him why he must. "They say Essos has entered the age of a new dawn. All those Great Reforms their
Stormborn Coalition enacted are working to recover the market from its upheavals, taking advantage of the broader network that exists now, making inroads to forging this new system of theirs. And she's won the full support of the Iron Bank, something no single ruler has done in centuries. And all that destruction she wrought that led to liberation, it's been inspiring people she has no reach over. Farther east than she's gone, slaves and servants and starving lowborn in the streets are rising up. They see what's happened in the Bay of Dragons and the Free Cities and it's given them hope."

*It's not just me then, he thinks in frustration. We all see she's amazing.*

"If her loyalists aren't blowing smoke," Davos muses, "she could be just the thing Westeros needs."

But Jon can't fall into that trap. It's too alluring. If he falls, he'll never want to climb out again. So he asks, "And what did Tyrion Lannister have to say on his queen's behalf about the Dragon Wrath of Braavos?"

When the wolf finds his way into the great hall, she's on the floor below the dais. Sitting on the cold hard stone, Ornela and Jhiqui near her, the trio playing with the baby between them, laughing and guarding as he fights his way up and down the dais steps, babbling at equal turns with giddiness and aggravation, depending on his immediate success. Her Unsullied at the grand entryway are meant to keep anyone from passing, but they step aside for Ghost.

Jaeh has been crawling wildly all over the place. He started about the moment he learned he could flip onto his stomach. But walking has taken time. He's just begun to struggle up in the last moon. Now he toddles unsteadily a few paces before he topplies and starts again.

When she spots the hulking creature stalking silently towards them, neck held low to the ground, Jhiqui gives a panicked cry and scurries backward up the steps. Ornela starts to snatch for her son, but Daenerys stays her hand with a calm word and a warm smile. She watches the babe finally notice him, distracted by his efforts then going still, forgetting what he was doing, yelping in surprise at the sight.

"No need to be afraid," she tells them in Dothraki. "The beast is my friend. He will not harm you while I'm here." She doubts he'd hurt them regardless, but just in case, she doesn't want her people getting too comfortable around wolves and dragons. They're still wild things, however she feels about them.

"Jaehaerys, Khaleesi," Jhiqui protests, frightened eyes on the animal."

"He's alright," she soothes, and runs her fingers through Ghost's pelt when he brushes up against her. In this, she has not a second of hesitation or worry. If he didn't hurt her simply because he smelled Jon on her skin, he's not going to hurt Jon's son. She's no fear. And neither does her son.

"Wolf," he says in broken High Valyrian, and gives a little bark that makes the girls laugh, as if to insist on his assertion. His bright eyes swing from the animal to his mother and back again, wanting but waiting to follow her lead. He's picked up snatches of words in a dozen of the languages thrown around him since his birth, Dothraki, Valyrian, Common Tongue the most. He mixes between them so badly that only Daenerys and Missandei manage to always understand him.

But that word, she's made certain he knows. Shown him drawings of so many things but that the most. Dragons and wolves. *My boy is made of dragons and wolves.* "That's right. It's a wolf. This is Ghost."
When he scrambles clumsily down the last few steps to the floor, he almost falls on his nose, catching a tiny hand on his mother's knee to save himself. The wolf flattens his massive body to the floor and scoots toward the boy. He waits just within reach, snout on his paws, letting Jaeh decide to come to him. Just as he braves touching him, Ghost bucks his nose up suddenly under the babe's hand, making him yelp again. It turns to a laugh only when his mother laughs, glancing up at her, emboldened by what he sees in her face, getting brasher with the wolf because of it.

He always wants to show off for her. Like his big brothers, always eager to prove he's the boldest, bravest, most reckless.

After he falls forward, collapsing into the wolf's flank with a huff and rolling his face against the fur, Ghost pops to his feet, dumping him on the floor. He towers over him and Jaeh thrusts his hands up into the white of his underbelly with a mischievous laugh, like he thinks he'll get in trouble for it. But Ghost just shakes himself, bends his neck, head upside down, and nips lightly at the boy's backside. When he flips to his hands and knees and tries to scurry away, Jon's wolf catches his shirt in those deadly fangs to stop him. His paws shuffle backward, dragging him across the slippery floor, leaving the babe shrieking in delight.

It warms the queen's cold heart.

Jon's been mining the dragonglass for more than a month beside her Dothraki by the time he brings her down to the cave. He's been keeping his distance. They've hardly been alone but for once or twice and both forced themselves to remain polite. The first time he's dared to touch her, he wraps his hand over hers where it grips the torch and leads her on, showing her the ancient drawings on the cave walls.

As she stares in wonder, he leans close, breathing in the scent of her hair, his arm sliding slowly around her waist, pressing himself into her back. She savors the embrace for a moment before she tries to step out of it. He doesn't let her go, surprising her. That surprise sparks a heat that breaks down her wall of resistance. Makes her forget for a split second why she'd been holding herself back.

"Dany…"

The torch drops into the sand. She spins in his grasp and arches onto her toes, crushing her mouth up into his with a sharp intake of air. Her hands go to his face, clenching in the curls at the nape of his neck, and he walks her backward until she hits the jagged stone. Pinning her. Deepening the kiss. Burning hunger and bridled frenzy roil between them in the intimate dark.

A big hand takes her thigh, hikes it up his side, dragging her hips against him. Hoisting her when she spreads for him. She locks her legs around him and bites down, bowing, yearning. Her body's been humming restlessly, urgently, full of energy, ever since he led her into the black, looked at her with such smoldering intensity. Like he knew what he wanted and was going to take it. You've no idea what I'm going to do to you, those eyes said, searing through her in his attentive quiet.

Jealousy seems to have provoked him in all the best ways.

He's tugging at laces and clasps to bare her when she finally remembers herself, her reservations, her resolve. Turning her head, breaking the kiss, she pushes him back, gasping, "No."

She drops to her feet and he takes short quick steps backward to give her space, but his expression is against it. She steadies, straightens her coat, walks out of the cave without another word. Won't
explain herself.

Cersei Lannister has outwitted her. It makes her blood boil. She's outwitted her clever little brother, the smart Spider, and every military commander at the Dragon Queen's disposal. How does that happen? It's cost Daenerys greatly. The Sand Snakes, the Greyjoys, Lady Olenna, a portion of her Unsullied. Her council tries to calm her, convince her to wait and not retaliate immediately, but she's implacable. Storming across the sand as surf kicks up, her rage makes Drogon roar in the distance, calling for blood. Arguing with her advisors, asking Jon.

After he says what he says, she pulls back, standing on the beach, still staring into his eyes. "I don't have to melt the Red Keep or destroy King's Landing to end this war," she says softly. Determined. An idea forming, bloomed from the sheer stubborn resistance to all their quelling words.

"You're a dragon, girl," the old woman she'd liked so much had said the day she left Dragonstone. "Be a dragon."

Daenerys turns to the sea, watching her eldest children fly. Seething.

She shouldn't have sent the Tyrell matriarch back to Highgarden. If she'd just kept her on the island a little longer, she'd still be alive. And now the Tyrell army is out of her control and the Reach is in jeopardy. Their most important puzzle piece.

As the Braavosi fleet took her horde to Storm's End, a dozen ships broke off when they passed Dragonstone, bringing her a contingent of bloodriders and a few of the Sand Snakes to keep with her. They were meant to arrive in time to reunite with their mother, or queen, whatever Ellaria Sand is precisely to all those girls. Combined with the fleet she sailed north with from Sunspear, it's been enough ships for the restored Stormborn fleet to maintain a chokehold on the capital by blocking the mouth to Blackwater Bay, where Dragonstone sits.

Euron couldn't get his ships past to King's Landing, so he swung back around towards the Iron Islands. He hit their siege from sea of Lannisport just as they'd secured victory of the Westerlands. He didn't try to retake Casterly Rock for the usurper queen. He just ambushed his niece and nephew in the dead of night, set aflame half their fleet, killed all he could, and sailed away with his prizes.

"He knows he can't get through Blackwater Bay," Tyrion pleads. "If he means to deliver his gifts to my sister, he'll need to come ashore southerly and trek by land. Somewhere above Storm's End, I'm betting, to avoid your Dothraki territory. We can set patrols of the coastline in the region, wait for him to come to us."

Betrayal within the Tyrell army on their siege of Casterly Rock. House Tarly turned on them, led them into a sabotage, opened up the Reach to Lannister looting. Lady Olenna has been murdered by the Kingslayer in her home, blindsided while her army was away. The last of the golden roses, eradicated, another great House ruined by the lions.

The Dothraki and Dornish contingent have retreated back to Storm's End to avoid clashing with the newly flipped Tyrell army, not wanting unnecessary casualties of soldiers she might be able to regain command of. And the Dornish...

She may lose the support of Dorne as well soon, if she can't fix this. Because of those damned Sand Snakes. The dead Dornish prince's bastards. There was no reunion with their mother when Nymeria and Tyene came ashore with the Dothraki because Ellaria hadn't come to Dragonstone as she was supposed to. Bloodthirsty to hurt Cersei, she'd boarded the Greyjoy head while they were docked in
She and her dragons set their sights to Euron's fleet. After a fierce argument with Nymeria and Tyene that ends with her ordering Unsullied to restrain them in their rooms before they do something treasonous, she takes Daario onto Drogon behind her. Two of his best Sons and five top Dothraki screamers she'd kept by her outside the horde. They cut southwest over land to reach the Summer Sea around Starfall, then fly the course forward to find him, catching up to his fleet just past the Salt Shore.

Euron's head ship is distinguishable in the dark by the macabre scene it presents, three mutilated Sand Snakes hanging from the Kraken's bow. One by her neck, one by her wrists, another by the harpoon impaling her chest. Daenerys is ferociously glad she barred their sisters from coming to save
them.

Drogon swoops low, arcing gracefully, wings splayed to glide as slow as he can over the sails, and her passengers drop nimbly onto the ship, catching themselves on various parts of the mast, sliding down under the cover of dark. She and her dragon arc up again before anyone notices him, disappearing into the blackness, circling.

Her men infiltrate to find the prisoners before her dragons announce their presence.

When the fighting breaks out, screams of violence reaching her over the roar of the sea wind, Drogon dives, his brothers behind him. They'd almost gotten on deck with the women before they were discovered, quietly killed enemies in their wake. Rhaegal and Viserion turn flames on the surrounding ships, distracting the ironborn, while Drogon alights on the starboard rail so heavily the whole ship careens, rocking all the way to its side for a few harrowing moments, almost capsizing.

By the time she collects her people and lifts into the air again, a bloodied Yara Greyjoy slumped against her back, pinned between Daenerys and Daario, Elia and Sarella Sand are saved, but Ellaria dies on deck under an ironborn axe. One Second Son and three of her Dothraki don't make it back, and an arrow lodges itself into the meat of the queen's thigh.

As Drogon flees, Rhaegal and Viserion leave broken burning pieces of Euron's ships sinking into the sea.

Over the wind, Daario shouts, "Well, serving my queen is never boring!"

"Catch her," she orders once they touch ground, because people are more concerned with their queen than the Greyjoy that's slipping sideways and about to fall. Daario grabs onto her at the last second, hoists her into his arms as he slides down Drogon's rough side and hits the grass with a stumble to keep his balance under her hanging weight.

The rest of the men scramble gracelessly off the beast's back, Sand girls too, and it's just Daenerys astride the base of his neck then. She's too afraid to move, the ride back already working the arrow horribly inside her, rending it into a worse hit. A dozen hands are reaching up for her, wanting to ease her down, but when she swivels, biting back a grimace of pain, she slides over his shoulder right into Jon Snow's arms. His hands grab her hips mid slide and pluck her out of it and into the air before it can hurt. Her fingers bunch too tightly on his shoulders as he lowers her to her feet.

As even a touch of her weight to the foot gets a wince, he only leaves her standing for half a second, getting an elbow under her knees, pulling her up to his chest before anyone can try to take her from him, before they even get finished barking, "Get her to the healers!"

"Stay, my love," she tells Drogon in Valyrian, making him settle begrudgingly when he would've flown. Then turns to her Lord Hand, "Tyrion, have Qhono help the arrows and spears out of my children's hides," just as Rhaegal and Viserion set down near their bigger brother, a fine quake trembling through the cliff.

His brow hikes. "Won't that leave him well charred?"

She spares her Hand an irritable look as Jon carries her past. Which isn't fair, she knows, since it would probably be true if she hadn't made certain to carefully forge a trust between warriors from her Dothraki commander to her dangerous son.

"Not all that more than a horse," he'd claimed when she introduced them, and she'd laughed.
"Only dragons don't break," she'd warned.

When he gets her inside, following the haphazard train of battered fighters, a grave Missandei leads him into her chambers, just a reassuring look to Daenerys when the queen would've protested letting her know that Jaehaerys was safely elsewhere. The scribe sweeps clear the long table and Jon sets her cautiously down onto the oak as a slew of Dothraki healers flood inside behind them, surrounding her to tend quickly. They tried to summon the island maester, but she directed him towards the women that need his attentions more urgently.

She doesn't know how she came to be holding Jon's hand. She only notices it when he starts to step back but can't, because her fingers clench tight around his, pressing them painfully into the tabletop as the arrow is snapped off and pushed through. To keep from crying out, her tongue gets bloodied. Trying to restore her dignity, she forces her cracking knuckles to let go of him, but his hand wraps around hers in response. She looks down at the clasp, looks up and gets stuck in his gaze, dark and earnest and upset, almost pleading. In a voice so low she almost misses it, he rasps, "You shouldn't have gone that way."

"Someone had to. Who else could have?" she dismisses.

He doesn't let go and move back until her council fills the room, swarming her while the healers work, grim and distressed and lecturing. Jon drifts farther and farther into the background until she blinks through her pain, looking for him, and he's just gone.

They try to stop her. They try their damndest to stop her from going out again on dragonback after the maester sews her wounds and binds her leg. But she has to. Who else can? And there isn't time to waste resting or healing. She sends word to the horde at Storm's End, commanding them out to meet her in the Crownlands. Once they reach the Goldroad, she's called, and Daenerys won't hear resistance.

Daario helps her limp her way out to the landing cliff where Drogon waits anxiously. He's the only one she allows, because he's the only one that hasn't spent so many days nonstop hammering at her conviction. The fact that she can't even walk on her own doesn't help her case, but once she's on her son, it won't matter. She's endured worse. This is worth it. This is necessary.

They can't lose the Reach.

How many people will starve through the winter, if she doesn't go?

She takes the Dothraki and Drogon and wrecks the Lannister supply train leaving Highgarden before they can make it to the capital with their spoils. She absorbs the survivors into her army, burning the Tarlys for their betrayal when they refuse to bend the knee, wresting control of the Tyrell forces. Her horde recovers what gold from the train that hasn't melted. Drogon avoids the grain wagons. She orders they be redistributed back to the Reachers.

This time, she won't rely on a fickle Westerosi army to guard their most fertile farmland and all its yield. She's learned from the Tarlys. She stations garrisons of Unsullied across all of the Reach and its crucial positions. As for Highgarden, which is now empty thanks to the Kingslayer, she deliberates with her council over what to do. Ultimately deciding that, for the time being, overseen by a Stormborn delegate, she'll place a Hightower heir in the Reach's ruling seat.
As she raged on the beach that day, the calmed storm in her face, chin lifting in her decision to wreak havoc, he’d tried to be disappointed that she appeared to have completely disregarded his words. But it wasn’t disappointment thrumming through his veins at the sight of her. It was thrilling heat. Desire. Jon may not enjoy what he does, not want the violence, but he understands that red focused rage. The call of the wolf singing in his blood, like her dragonfire.

After her wrath of retaliation rights the queen's courses from their short-lived defeats, she gives into her court and confines herself to bed until her leg further heals. And because he won't allow himself to knock every time he finds his feet having taken him to her door, lost in his thoughts, following ignored urges or chasing idly after Ghost, he doesn't catch a glimpse of her for weeks.

He's driving himself crazy. He can't leave the island yet. He can't be where he needs to be, in the North, and he can't be where he wants to be, beyond that door with Daenerys Targaryen. So he must be kept busy. He mines and he paces and he mines and he goes over the missives sent south from Winterfell and Castle Black and he paces and he mines and he explores Dragonstone with its eclectic mix of peoples. Trying to take the time to get to know the queen's foreigners she's so protective of.

They tell him stories. They tell him so many stories.

A good lot of it has to do with their Mhysa.

When his impulse control snaps, Jon goes to the island blacksmith. Commissions him to construct Targaryen armor. Whether it's to have an excuse to finally see her face after a month of nothing or more altruistic intentions, he's right in his desire to want her taking precautions. Only when he has the armor in his arm does he knock.

She's on her feet by the window when Missandei brings him in, highlighted by the pink sunset, hair loose, a soft gown that's too thin for this windy place drawing his eye to the exposed line of her spine. "You have something for me?"

"You're a dragonrider. You're a military commander. If you're going to be going into battle, you need to act like it," he tells her, his words possibly insulting but his slow tone disarming.

She turns to face him with the ghost of a grin, arms folded over her stomach. "I've had this argument with my council many times." She watches him set the metals onto the table between them and moves forward, just a slight limp now. She runs a fingertip along a curve before she lifts her eyes to his, standing too close. "Your thoughtfulness is appreciated, King Snow," she says softly, almost whispering, "but I can't move freely with him in things like this. And if I can't do that, I won't be able to stay on. I'll fall."

So he steps back from her, schooling his face stern, the wall between them hurting. She's treating him gently now, as if she's concerned for his feelings. She shouldn't have to do that. He shouldn't have made her think it was required.

But when he goes to collect the gift, she stays his hand. "Leave it. Just because I can't wear it doesn't mean I don't want it."

In the corridor, he stops to steady himself, to straighten his head out. He should let it go. He should stop pacing outside her door at all hours like a thwarted wolf. She's made her boundaries clear. He should leave her alone. But he's telling himself this even as he returns to the blacksmith.

The next he's on the other side of her door, he's done better. Thought smarter. There's no servant to usher him in, only the muffled lure of her voice pulling him forward. He finds her in the bath. A
steaming tub under another open window for all the sky to see her this way. His boots falter on the cobblestone, nearly losing grip of the armor. He should spin, shouldn't he? He should turn his back and give her privacy. He should at least drop his damned eyes. But he only stands frozen, watching her watch him.

Beyond the first flicker of surprise at his entrance, she doesn't balk. She smiles a slow complicated smile, myriad meanings to the curve of those lush lips, her bright eyes burning into him, demanding his spine stiff. After a moment, she sighs in something like surrender, sinking herself lower into the water, until it comes to her chin and she rests her head on the tub slope, somewhat obscuring her.

"Come closer, Jon."

And he does.

"You were looking for me?"

"I wish you'd stop playing games with me," he growls, the intensity of his agitation taking them both by surprise. Forgetting why he'd come here.

Dany's smile wanes, frown pulling at her brow. "I've never once played games with you," she says. "None of this is a game to me." But instead of defending herself further, she deflects. "It's Daario that plays games."

"Aye, he's shameless," he complains.

"Incorrigible," she teases. "He refuses to stop pursuing me." Her eyes slide away from him to idle around the room. "Charming me." Her fingers on the tub lip stroke in distracting patterns. "Flirting."

"Enough, Dany."

She sobers quite suddenly. Sighs again. "You're not a stupid man, Jon Snow. But you're naïve," she tells him. Then, "Come down here. I'm tired of looking up at you." And his knees give out on him before he can choose to obey or defy. "You keep taking his bait, letting him provoke you, and you don't see Daario's game."

"Like I said ... I'm not interested in games."

"There's no need to get territorial," she promises, and the bluntness of that jerks his shoulders up, taken aback. "I see you're trying very hard not to, but you're failing."

"I can't make you out," he admits, laments it, frustrated. There was a time, long ago, in a place far away from here, they were completely honest with each other. Completely open. They understood each other. And now they're strangers, no matter how hard he tries to bridge the distance.

He's not just Jon and she's not really Dany.

No, now he's the King in the North and she's the Dragon Queen.

Her wrist turns where it rests on the lip, palm up, her fingers splaying out. The offer is undeniable. He lays his scarred palm to hers and circles her delicate wrist with sword roughened fingers. She grips his the same.

The quiet sadness, that banked fire in her eyes, makes him wonder if she feels the same regret for what was lost. The same longing.
"What have you brought me?" she whispers.

"You need protection," he declares, strengthening, grounding himself with something to focus on, what he knows how to do. "Traditional armor is too hindering, aye, I heard you, but this should do."

"Hand me that robe," she orders, nodding towards the piece of silk draped over a chair. He's on his feet and turning back with it when she steps out of the water and into him abruptly, brushing against him as she slides her arms into the sleeves and ties it together. Then she stands, staring, expectant.

It takes him a minute to shake himself back to focus. He picks the pieces off the floor one by one, very precisely fitting the chainmail dress over her, smoothing it at her shoulders and down her arms, her torso, her spine, cinching the clasps at each side to pull it taut under her chest. It hangs loose around her thighs, unobstructive. She's pliant under his touch, letting his hands run all over her, and he tells himself not to linger. Don't take advantage. But once in awhile, he'll drift.

Were her breasts always that heavy?

He takes a breath to clear his head and hooks the shortened breastplate across her top, the red and black Targaryen sigil etched across a mixture of metal and leather. Still armor, but it is its own unique assemblage, so she's lightweight and flexible.

Dany spends awhile getting used to the feel of it on her, moving her arms, spinning, tipping one side then the other, before she twirls back to him like the end of a dance, a brilliant smile blooming. Her hands have fallen thoughtlessly to his chest, as she'd done a dozen times before, in another life, it feels like. She arches onto her toes and grazes her mouth from his ear down the line of his bristled jaw in what was probably meant to be a kiss on the cheek. She says, "Thank you, Jon."

Ygritte would hate you. The thought comes unbidden. It stills him when his hands would've reached out and snatched her hips. When his body would've crushed her against him, taken control of her just as he's wanted to do since the moment he walked into the great hall and saw her up on that throne. The queen wouldn't be impressed with his wildling either.

If he hadn't been still grieving her when they met, he's realized, he probably wouldn't have been reminded of her by Dany. The fiery temper, the impulsivity, the stubbornness, the meanness, aye, they share that. But Dany is strong willed in her compassion and her ambition and her morals. Ygritte had the same viciousness, but the difference is Dany's comes from her protectiveness. Her unchangeable resolve to care for the people that can't protect themselves. To bring fire to only those that she believes have earned their suffering. She's impulsive and emotional, but she's also controlled, he's found, watching her reign over the months. Watching her wage war.

Maybe she started out as a survivor. But as her power has grown, she's become a hero. A warrior queen.

In his grief, he'd seen so much more of Ygritte in this woman than there had truly been. And in that, he'd been blind to how much more there was to Daenerys.

It's hard loving a ghost. It's … hollowing.

He knows that better than anyone.

At least Dany lit a fire in him. But now, with her right here yet somehow out of his reach, he doesn't know what to do with it. He just knows he can't keep letting it burn.
Jaehaerys is more restless than even his mother. When he refuses to go to bed, she doesn't get exasperated with him. She doesn't force him into his crib. She would never think of punishing Drogon for his spirit and she means to never do the same for her littlest one. She'll try to coax him with stories in bed, with songs and dancing through the unlit room, but she won't force him if those don't work. She takes his hand and walks the dark castle with him while everyone sleeps.

It's one of these nights that he breaks free of her and goes running. She chases at a lazier pace, following him eventually into the great hall.

He clambers up the dais steps and climbs into the imposing stone chair at the very top. He stands up in it until her raised eyebrow makes his backside drop to the seat, knowing what's safe and what's not, knowing he'll be in trouble. She ascends the steps with a humorous smile, watching his mischief. This tiny child dwarfed so starkly by the massive structure, his head held high.

"Are you an Aegon The Conqueror?" she teases. Then kneels before the throne, scratches her fingers at his belly to make him squirm, holding his ankles. "No, I don't think so. You'll be a king of peace and wisdom. You'll have no need to conquer. I promise you, I'll give to you a better world."

"Mama," he says, but something about it raises the hairs on her arms. His eyes go past her, uneasiness replacing his comfort.

Daenerys stiffens. Rising to her feet, she turns to find strange men filling up the entrance, flooding silently in together. Dozens of them. Ironborn, she realizes, getting a better look at them in the moonlight coming through the windows when they begin to cross the vast empty space. Yara's men.

"Yes?" she coolly demands, unmoving. Her son's fingers are bunched in the skirt of her gown. He's in the throne, hidden behind her legs. She's struck by the sudden ferocity of knowing she should've kept him in their chambers. Of knowing something is wrong. Knowing these men...

They mean her harm.

Every single one of them is armed, swords and short blades and axes out, ugliness on their sea leathered faces, in their gleaming hard eyes. They advance on her and her gaze sweeps the room, hoping for a weapon, something to defend herself. The design flaw in this keep, the great hall turned into a death trap, no way out but through them to the grand entrance. She can't tell Jaeh to run, because he'd have to run right into their arms. She can't let them make it up the dais.

Terror does not paralyze her tonight. It burns her up.

It only even slightly works because they expect her to wait, helpless and pliant, for them to come to her. Her hand moves discreetly between the silken folds of her skirt. When she has grip of her dagger, she orders Jaeh in Dothraki, "Climb, my love," and throws herself down the steps, shouting for her guards.

Leans back as she falls forward, knees sliding to the floor, coming in low to the closest man, slicing her dagger across his thighs then arcing it into his wrist before his sword can come down on her head. She spins, snatching the sword from the air when he drops it with a yell, back on her feet and swinging it into a defensive position as they swarm her wildly.

"Dragon bitch!" he snarls, yanking the dagger out of his wrist. "Supposed to take you alive. Don't tempt us."

She dodges an axe, jumps from a short blade, twirls, uses her stolen weapon to parry a broadsword that almost gets her neck. She makes another few cuts before they disarm her. Wrenching her wrist,
breaking her knuckles around its hilt, bearing her down to the floor as she thrashes and screams and kicks out, five men around her, pinning every part of her. Between their bodies, she watches a brute leap onto the throne and grab after her son as he struggles higher up the jagged edges.

Daenerys screams until her lungs burn and keeps screaming.

The sheer intensity of rage and fear pumping in her feels as if it should explode out of the confines of her body in a flood of fire. It should leave them ash.

But she's not a dragon. No fire escapes her. She can't stop them.

Somewhere in the distant night, her children are roaring.

The ironborn snatches Jaeh by the foot, dragging him down the sculpted rocks, dropping him to the floor when the boy bends and bites his hand. A fist slams into her temple, dulling her, but she keeps screaming until an elbow shoves between her teeth, smothering her voice.

Stinking breath, a tongue licking her cheek. "No one's gonna come, dragon bitch. Anybody near enough to hear you is dead."

At the top of the dais, the ironborn tugs a knife from his belt and aims for her son. Jaeh rolls down the steps, crying, and a snake of fire streams through the intricate grate of a window behind the throne, alighting his assaulter.

The whole hall seems to quake with the impact of a furious dragon slamming into the side of the castle. Dust drifts off the cinders but the wall remains intact. Before Drogon can ram it again, a streak of white soars over her, slamming into one of her assaulters, Ghost's teeth ripping his throat. And at the gap he leaves, Daenerys bucks, rolls from under them, her fingers wrapping the splintered wood of a dropped axe, spinning on one knee to drive it into a man's gut with another wrathful scream.

Ghost whirls to face the rest, red streaked, snarling.

In the entryway, the sound of fighting and dying rings out. Axes clanging stone. Through her panic, she sees Jon Snow cutting through them to get to her, but all her focus is on her son, curled up behind her, behind Ghost. When he nears, any finesse abandons him. He rams himself into the man she's backpedaling from, knocking him to the ground, lost in that red berserk haze she's seen almost take him once before.

Killing them. Gone feral with it, him and his wolf. Killing them all.

She's never witnessed him in true battle before.

There were so many nights he'd woken her, tangled up together for warmth or across a campfire under the stars, with the guttural noises of strangled distress that gripped him in his sleep. His night terrors of war that would make him scream in his sleep. That would make him dangerous until he came back to his senses.

Daario knifes a man in the back as he enters. Kovarro hooks his curved weapon through every neck he can reach. Nymeria lashes her whip around the throat of another, yanks him forward into Daario's knife. But as her protectors finally flood into the chaotic hall, there's not much left for them to do.

It's already a massacre.

Daario goes to her first, ignoring the remnants of fighting around him, touches her face to ask if she's alright, but her eyes are on Jon. He moves around her, picks Jaeh up, despite Ghost's warning growl.
He presses behind her and her body turns instinctively into him, towards her son, crushing the boy between them, her hands grasping his tiny face, hushing his crying.

Murmuring nonsensically in Valyrian.

Jon finishes the last man, splattered with blood and vibrating, even more animalistic in this moment than his direwolf. His kills weren’t as quick as they were brutal. Now he stands amidst the carnage and pants, dark eyes slowly clearing, half coming back to his senses. She should be focused absolutely on her son, but she's staring at Jon now. Shaken, in shock, holding Jaehaerys close.

She watches the sight of them like that filter through to him, the baby boy on Daario's arm, and Dany...

*He thinks this is my family.* He thinks this is Daario's son. She watches it occur to him, sink in, watches his wild face shutter. She tries to take a step in his direction and he jerks violently backward. His sword clatters to the stone, too loudly in the sudden silence of the hall.

There's a tangled mess of emotion in his eyes. Hurt and shock and fear and shame and jealousy. Devastation. Horrified, she thinks by his actions, his loss of control. He doesn't want her to come near him. Afraid of himself, afraid for her. Is he afraid he'll hurt her? He looks to Ghost, blinks vacantly, then he just walks out.

"Jon," she calls, her voice hoarse, wrecked.

He doesn't turn back.

And in the echoing quiet, Daario muses lightly, "That one's got a little madness in him as you do."

Daenerys takes her mewling child from him and hugs him tight. Whispers fierce promises to him as she collapses to the stone steps.
He'd gone beastly. In that hall, when he'd seen them on her, he'd lost himself. He didn't know what he was doing. He doesn't know what he would've done. That's not him. He's not some savage berserker. It'd happened before, several times, and each one worries him more. But with Ramsay, it was a steady build through the disorienting hell of battle and grief. It'd never happened so instantly as that night.

Ashamed, he keeps himself to his rooms.

He doesn't let himself think about how she's a mother. A real mother. A small babe in her arms and that smug mercenary beside her. He can't get the image out of his head, but he won't let himself think on it.

Davos brings word the next day of what's happening when he returns Longclaw to him with a subdued, "The queen wanted to be sure this wasn't lost to you."

"Is she alright?" he asks, turning himself away. "And the… And the child?"

"Only a few bruises between them. Nothing that won't heal easy. She took to her chambers to calm him. Still hasn't let go of him now that she's come out, but the action has started."

Dothraki and Unsullied guards littered the corridors that night, killed quietly at their posts, betrayed. Not Yara Greyjoy, but her ironborn men that had been loyal to her uncle in secret. Bribed by the pretender queen after his death to bring her Daenerys Targaryen, as her council put it. The fallen have been burned and honored. The surviving conspirators that were caught trying to get away in the attack have been questioned. Dany's set the Greyjoy siblings on task to ferret out any remaining disloyalty among the people they keep close to them. The untrustworthy men they brought onto the sanctuary of her island.

He doesn't dare consider what would've happened to Dany… And her child. If he hadn't sounded the alarm, pulled by his wolf's insistence, whose frantic scratching and whining at his door to get out had been impossible to ignore. Ghost went running and Jon couldn't not follow.

Davos tries to draw him out, the next day and the next, but he just can't.

She knocks on his door, holding Jaeh on her hip.

When he answers, she faces him openly, vulnerably, finally honest.

His gaze skims down from her bruised face, over Jaeh, and tries to skim away but snags at the splint on her hand, his jaw tightening, fingers furling. None of that is in his voice when he greets, "Your Grace."

"Jon Snow," she sighs, and tightens her grip on her son, who's been uncharacteristically quiet since the attack. It breaks her heart to see him fold in on himself, to see that childish excitement and thrill seeking turned to something solemn and guarded. "This is Jaehaerys. May we come in?"
He steps aside wordlessly. She passes by, scans the room while he closes the door behind her, and she chooses very deliberately where to go. She sits down on his bed, jostling Jaeh gently on her lap as he plays with draping strands of her hair, her brash babe made shy and uncertain. Jon obviously expects she came here to speak, but she doesn't say a word. Not yet. She just sits, watching him. Encouraging him to watch her. And the boy.

He doesn't want to, she can see that. The way his body angles half away, not quite faced to them, the way his expressive eyes keep downcast, roving the room in a vain attempt to fix on something else. He doesn't want to look at them, but he can't help it. And the longer he looks…

A breath shudders out of Jon's lungs.

Her calculated patience pays forth, dawning realization in his eyes.

And then, "Wolf," Jaeh calls softly as Ghost pads in from the other room. The animal moves straight to her and her son, nosing into her hip before resting his chin on her knee and letting Jaeh pat brutally at his head, red eyes flickering with every clumsy impact, appearing put upon. Her son mutters, "Good wolf. My wolf."

Jon's rooted in place. He inhales, tries to find his voice, shudders out another breath instead, his whole body heaving with it. He crosses to them slowly, painstakingly, and ends up on his knees before her, before the boy, the direwolf beside them. His eyes are shiny, sounding gutted when he manages, "Dany?"

"I'm sorry," she whispers, lips moving against her son's temple as she hugs him to her. Their son. The disbelief and distress and the beginning of betrayal on his beautiful face makes her want to crawl inside herself. "I wanted to come back. When I knew, I wanted more than anything to come back. But how could I? Empty-handed when you needed…" Her voice trails off without an end, faltering, wishing there was something to say that would feel like real justification. But all she can offer is her honesty. "And then I finally saw you again and you were disappointed in me and I couldn't find a way to tell you after that. I wasn't sure it was safe."

"Dany," he pleads.

"My love," she tells Jaeh softly in Valyrian, "Mama told you about Papa. Told you he would find us. This is him. This is your papa."

Jon's hand hovers in the air near her shoulder, falls hesitantly to the boy's curls when Jaeh turns to peer at him, his thumb sweeping his cheek. Eyes stuck on their son, he echoes, "Jaehaerys?"

"Yes."

"You said you couldn't have children."

"And you didn't believe me." Then she adds, "I wasn't supposed to be able to. I thought that gift was gone from me. But you gave it back."

Another overwhelmed breath shudders from him. Disbelieving, distraught, awed. She knows the uglier emotions will come when the reality sets in for him. She's braced. She made her choices and she won't shirk from the fallout.

She says again, "I'm so sorry."
He's furious at her for lying. For keeping his child from him for so long.

Jaehaerys will be fifteen months soon.

Jon should've been able to be there for her as she carried him, as she fought her wars and amassed her empire, all the while growing his son inside of her, creating this life from nothing, all alone. It was his duty, it was his right to stand at her side through that, and she made it an impossibility.

But she asked you to come with her. You could've been there.

No. It's not the same. It's not on him. He didn't know. And he couldn't leave the North undefended. Besides, she could've sent word at any time. If she deemed it too dangerous, held her secret too securely for that, then she's still had months to tell him. He's been right in front of her and she's hidden from him. Lied to him.

He can't forgive her. He can't even look at her. But he wants to know the lad. He's drawn to him so inexorably. He's missed too much already. But he doesn't know what to say to her. He forces his mouth shut when she's near, fixes his eyes elsewhere, because if he lets himself get caught up by her, he'll say something horrible. He'll hurt her. As angry as he is, he still doesn't want that.

So the queen keeps her distance, allowing him time with Jaeh on his own, Missandei lingering close at first to guide him through it.

It's not an easy quest.

Jaeh is temperamental, wary of him as he would be of any other stranger, especially after what happened with the ironborn. Any other stranger. Gods, he's a stranger to his own son. He hadn't fathomed ever being able to hate Dany. For this, he does. For this, he's tormented.

Missandei and Ghost circle Jon, staying close, leaning in. The woman spends time touching him and smiling at him and laughing, completely relaxed, as if they've known each other well. She does this with him alongside Dany's other confidants, the Dothraki handmaiden and the Lhazareen khaleesi. It takes him an embarrassing amount of time to understand what they're doing, how they're coaxing the child open to trusting him naturally.

He knows it would be much easier to accomplish with his mother here, but no one acknowledges this.

After awhile, it gets better. At least with Jaeh.

There are men working tirelessly in the mine, and more loading crates of dragonglass into longboats to fill up the cargo ships waiting at sea to ferry supplies to forges all across Westeros, and he should be one of them. Instead, Jon sits in the sand building imaginary castles with his son. His son who is happy, playing and grinning and laughter coming easy again. Missandei perches unobtrusively on a rock outcropping nearby, her chosen post after she brought him down to the beach to Jon while he was breaking. Obviously at the queen's order, though she doesn't say so. And he tries to push her out of his mind, not wanting to darken his mood while he's with Jaehaerys.

Some days, he still can't believe any of this is real.

But he wonders if Dany is watching them from a balcony or cliff somewhere. He feels her there, but he always feels her with him, so it's impossible to know.

When a sprawling gathering of the freedmen families that live in the keep descend the stone steps, Jon finds himself abandoned. The families settle on the beach with blankets and baskets of food to
enjoy one of the sunnier days they've seen on the island. Jaeh runs off to crash into them, tugging at their children, being lifted and swung and tossed between old women and young girls and fathers and hulking warriors alike. He watches just how warmly his son mixes in with them, how comfortably their queen's defenseless heir gets lost among them, these lowborn, dirt covered and diverse. Laughing and relaxing. They seem so foreign to Jon, speaking different languages, wearing strange clothes, but together they're an unmistakable community.

A pack.

She's collected people from every corner of this world and made them that. Made them pack. No, not all of them were collected or conquered. A lot of them gravitated to her. Ghiscari and Volantenes and Braavosi and Dothraki were conquered. But from Dorne and the Reach and the Iron Islands to the Free Cities and Summer Isles and Ibben and Yi Ti and Asshai, people have chosen to come to her, to follow her, to be part of this.

He's never seen anything like it. None of it. And he's most certainly never seen a royal, a ruler, a queen do as she does, welcome and accept and protect as she does, caring for her people without lines drawn between classes or bloodlines. Jon has never known a lord or lady to do as she does. It awes him, humbles him, inspires him.

She always had a knack for that. Since the day she first fell out of the sky to him, she's been affecting him this way.

It's why he can't wrap his head around all the horrible things he's heard of what happened in Essos when the Dragon Queen took hold with fire and blood, spreading her reign across half a continent with unimaginable force. Volantis, Slaver's Bay, the Dragon Wrath of Braavos…

How can the stories he's heard from Westerosi before he landed here and the stories he's heard from the people that surround her… How can all those tales possibly be describing the same woman?

He doesn't know what to believe. The only thing he's confident of now is that he can't trust what he feels. He's too biased by his feelings for her, his deep-seated instinct towards devotion. He can't see her clearly.

"Missandei?" he says, beckoning her closer, his gaze on Jaeh as bigger kids chase him through the white frothing surf, all screaming wildly.

The gentle Naathi sits carefully in the sand beside him. "Yes, Your Grace?"

"They call her Mhysa," he mentions, nodding towards the freedmen, his northern burr mangling the sound, he knows. "I've been told it means mother. The Unsullied at Winterfell do that too to an extent. Naming themselves Mother's Men, like they're proud of that, proud to be her soldiers. But not just that. As if she's their mother? Isn't that odd? They've no choice but to trust that she has their best interests in mind and they shouldn't question her. That's not how a lord should rule his people."

She looks confused. "That's how they do, no?"

"Aye, but they shouldn't."

"They call her Mhysa because she saved us. She freed us. It's not as if she's our mother in the sense you know that word. Mhysa means…” She hesitates, brow furrowed, searching for a way to have him understand a culture he can't imagine. "It's because she's our protector. Just as she birthed her dragons back into the world, she gave us new life as well. She gave us choice. We can question her, Your Grace. We may leave her if we desire. We may do as we wish, lead whatever path with our
new lives that we decide to, so long as we adhere to Stormborn laws. And those are simple things, her laws, *good* things."

He doesn't see the distinction. "They worship her like a goddess."

"Is she not?" Missandei counters, her smile serene.

"Possibly," he must admit grudgingly then, ruefully, remembering the glorious woman that walks through fire unscathed and rides dragons that were never meant to exist. It's likely true. If anyone ever was, she is some sort of goddess, isn't she? But that fills him with wonder equally as it worries him. Reminds him of the same thought he's had a hundred times. *Nobody should wield that much power.*

"There are much worse things to worship in this world," is all the Naathi leaves him with.

And his troubled thoughts shatter apart with a laugh the second his little lad leaps out of nowhere, crashing into him as Ghost would, collapsing him into the sand.

One day, he comes up beside a line of worried Stormborners standing in a diligent row along a higher veranda. Tyrion, Missandei, Varys, Ornela, Daario, Dothraki, a few Ghiscari. Jaeh on his hip, he cuts between the row to discover what's captured their attentions, and he sees the tiny figure she makes in the distance. At the lip of a green cliff below them, silver braid blowing behind her, pacing strangely.

"What is she doing?" he demands, an apprehensive frown darkening his features.

"Practicing," Tyrion groans.

Her more sensible advisors all appear gravely concerned, while Daario and the Dothraki seem to be anticipating something thrilling, which should tell him all he needs to know about what's going wrong here. But he doesn't get it. Until she backs up and starts running and he recognizes the sight with a horrific jolt. He's seen her do this before. But that cliff is far from a waterfall. It's a sharp face and deadly rocks below.

Jon lurches that last step he has, stomach slamming against the stone ledge to stop him, panicked. She jumps. A yell strangles in his throat.

Wings cut into view as Drogon swoops up into the sky, Dany landing roughly on his back before she can plummet, rolling, skidding, nearly falling before she gets a strong hold and rights herself. They all breathe out in relief together. Daario's smirk is proud and amused and Jon wants to punch him. Instead, he hoists Jaeh higher in his arms, keeping his hands occupied from the impulse. Her advisors around him are grimly quiet, but the Dothraki give a chorus of triumphant whoops and whistles, pounding their fists and weapons into the air. It all only intensifies his anger and distress.

"The woman is mad," he growls. "She can't be doing that. She's the damned queen of this bloody empire she's wrangled herself. What does she think will happen if she dies? It'll all fall apart. Everything will be lost."

"Some things are worth the risk, North King," Daario mocks.

Jon turns to glower at him. "Not this. Not her."

"You don't think being able to do *that* will come in handy in battle?"
"She shouldn't be in battle."

"Good luck telling her that," Tyrion mutters miserably, darkly in a way Jon's never seen of him.

Daario turns to go, stopping in front of Jon, shoulder to shoulder. Looking at him with half pity, half scorn, he says, "You can't change a dragon, my friend."

"We're not friends."

"As you say."

"The council has discussed your concerns with our queen," Missandei tells him, after she's handed Jaehaerys over at his open doorway.

Jon frowns at the woman. "My what?"

"You were worried about our war efforts unraveling should the queen perish," she says simply, jarring him. He can't even recoil from the punching impact of that thought before she's jarred him again. "She informed us that you haven't yet been made aware of her resolve for succession."

"Succession," he echoes dazedly, eyes turning down to Jaeh in his arms.

"Yes, she permitted me to tell you. Jon Snow of House Stark, King in the North, is successor to Queen Daenerys. Until her son comes of age, if she should die, everything she has is yours to command."

"That's not... What? That's not what? He can't say. He's lost his voice. His mind goes empty as those powerfully formal words sink in.

Missandei offers no aid. Her pretty face is unreadable. Her posture ramrod. This is the regal servant that'd announced her queen's endless titles in the great hall, faithful, intimidating. "She's addressed her military commanders about this. Every fighting force is prepared for that exigency. You would have her resources at your disposal to weather the Great War. But you would also be required to do whatever in your power to maintain the Stormborn Coalition across the sea and at home. Her Grace trusts that you would not abandon her people."

"No."

"And that you would lean on her councils. And protect her children."

"Always," he murmurs, still dazed.

"If that is all, Your Grace," Missandei dismisses, sparing him barely a heartbeat to seize the offer before she's gone, leaving him frozen in the doorway.

*I'm just a northern bastard. How would I ever keep her legacy together?*

+ 

Daenerys has recently been spending more time with the northern king's Hand than he has, she'd wager. Which is good, she knows, since the cause is his days being kept occupied more and more with their child between the mining shifts he insists on. Whatever happens from here, she wants Jaeh to know he once had a mother and father both that loved him, for however long. By the way Jon has
taken to seeking him out, reluctant to let go, she's hopeful of that. And it has also given her the opportunity to learn more of the King in the North, how he came to be, how his people see him, how they would say he's handled what he's taken on and pushed them into.

The man she knows so well is Jon Snow, not the king.

She's been taking steps to change that.

Davos has been most helpful.

"That's why those tough sons of bitches chose him," he finishes, following beside her as she walks the stonework parapets, observing the arrival in the island's cove.

Provisions carried in from the longboats, cargo ships from overseas, trade routes running smoothly from the Free Cities despite her enemy's attempts at disrupting their supply restores. State sponsored trade pacts established to help Westeros through winter and its wars and help Essos through its rebuilding and the tumultuousness of finding new paths. Pentos to Dragonstone, Braavos and Lorath to White Harbor and Widow's Watch, Sunspear to Volantis, the Reach outward.

"He brings people together, just as you do," the old smuggler says. "Only he doesn't have dragons to do it for him."

Daenerys slows her pace, looking archly sidelong, the precipice of anger.

His eyes widen. "No offense intended, Your Grace. I just meant he's got no birthright, that boy. He's got no name. But he's brought us all together, hasn't he? Ready to fight for something everybody thinks are fairy tales. Because they've seen him fight for them. They know where he comes from and what he stands for. They believe in him. By the skin of his teeth, he's *earned* the allegiance of wildlings and northmen and Vale Andals and Riverlanders and black brothers and even some Unsullied. And the Dragon Queen's allegiance as well, I reckon."

"He has," she coolly permits, attention turned again to the sea.

She doesn't like his insinuation, accidental or not, as if Jon Snow earned the loyalty he's acquired but she has not. That all she is worth is her dragons. But she lets it pass. He's not the first to think so, or say so to her face, and he won't be the last.

Perhaps she *is* nothing more than her dragons.

But what would her dragons be without her?

"Thank you for letting me keep you, Ser Davos," she dismisses after a moment, catching sight of Ornela rounding a bend in the steps, coming toward her.

Davos turns, moves respectfully aside to allow the Lhazareen past, and then she's at the queen's side, her expression conflicted, and he's gone.

"I don't know about this."

"You are a *khaleesi,*" she reminds the woman, bolsters her, chin lifted with pride. "You are of Lhazar. Whatever *they* say, you know what that means. You know what you are capable of. I trust in you, Ornela."

"I swore to stay by your side. And Jaehaerys. I'm supposed to be here."
"And you will come back to us," she assures, laying a warm hand on hers against the stinging cold breeze where they're clasped anxiously at her stomach. "But first, you will accomplish as I've tasked you to."

"I will, Khaleesi," the Lhazareen promises, using Daenerys to steady herself, steel herself, nerves locking away. She starts to pass around her, but hesitates, eyes darting, body held back.

The queen pulls her in for a strong hug. "You will be fine. You will be missed." Then she lets her go, watching from the heights as Ornella descends to the cove to meet her waiting party. When the longboats are unloaded and ready to push back out, she and her guards embark. They row into the waves and Ornella looks up as she goes. Daenerys refuses to turn away until they are out of view.

At the top, she finds Missandei looking for her. "The council needs you."

"Word from our strongholds?" she guesses, knowing little birds like to slip their way off and on the island with the traders for their spymaster. Her scribe only dips her chin. She sighs. "Very well."

In the war room, what awaits her is a table full of grim faces, half of which look worryingly guilty. More clashes with the Lannister army, they explain. Bad weather turning the tide. Weather that somehow pulled the Dothraki back while the Lannisters took advantage and braved the storm to cross down and install themselves in the Dornish Marches, where they evidently plan to make their stand.

"It's smart. Mountaintop warfare. With as outnumbered as they are, this is their best strategy. It feels like my brother. In the northern Red Mountains, warfare will only be possible one battle at a time, one valley from another. Confusion in the border zones will only aid them."

"There should not be confusion," she cuttingly declares. "There are no longer borders between us, Lord Tyrion. We are supposed to be working as one."

"A nice thought, but our ways are entrenched deep and it's not as easy as that. The Dornish and Dothraki have blended well together, but beyond them…"

"It wouldn't have been a problem if not for the storm. It came out of nowhere. They had no warning."

"How did they make it that far to begin with?"

"The Marcher lords have conspired with them. Even with enemies at all sides, they refuse to join us. They won't abide a horde of savages taking over their ruling seat. Between the Dothraki and the Dornish tromping all over their region, we've stoked quite a fervor in natures that are already prone to feuding. They despise the Dornish with a vengeance. And everyone despises the Dothraki."

"Which couldn't be worse for us, because the Marchers may have smaller numbers but are the most heavily fortified and war hungry in all of Westeros."

"Then why wasn't this anticipated?" she challenges.

"A miscalculation on my part, Your Grace. I assumed they'd hole up in their mountains and wait the war out. They've remained rather neutral in recent years."

"A grave miscalculation apparently," Jon notes, his husky disapproval making her want to turn to him before she bites the urge back.

"Apparently," Tyrion echoes wryly.
"Your Dothraki are at the disadvantage now. They don't know the terrain. And the mountains provide well cover from your dragons."

"Forgive me, my lords. With as much as all that occupies me, it's difficult to not let any single detail fall by the wayside," she preludes. Then hardens. "But I was sure we'd assembled garrisons at each end of the Red Mountains passes after the Dornish had moved through to the Reach. Am I mistaken?"

"It was the storm."

"One storm," she counters. "One storm stretched from Summerhall to Starfall with enough strength to stymie both my khalasar and the Dornishmen?"

"Unprecedented weather has been sweeping through every region in more recent years, Your Grace. It's not wholly unheard of for something so powerful to strike without signs."

"The Marchers have taken the north end of the Boneway. The khalasar has been pushed back towards Storm's End by the rains and winds. Between Lannisters and blitz attacks from the Marchers, half the Dornish that were left to guard the passes have been slaughtered."

"Have they pushed farther than the passes?" she asks.

"No. They're positioning defensively in the mountain range."

"They intend for us to come to them. But we will not."

"Your Grace—"

"She's right," Jon interjects. "Let them rot in the mountains until they get restless or starve out. It'd take on too many losses to send your men in after them." For the first time in weeks, his rigid body turns and he looks at her. "They expect you to be who they've heard about. Bloodthirsty and rash. They've risked themselves on you being eager enough to destroy them that you give up better sense. But that's not you."

"We'll reinforce the mouths of the passes," she tells them, trying to ignore the affect his words have on her, the yearning and ache his eyes awaken. "Beyond that, I don't want my men chasing a hare's tail to their destruction."

"I concur," her Hand assures.

After a little further briefing and debate, she dismisses the council and rises from her chair to face the darkening horizon. Calling, "King Snow, wait a moment."

The tension in his shoulders, in the shift at the line of his jaw, reminds her that he'd rather be anywhere else, but his feet still him, staying as the others flood out. Once they're alone, she turns to him, schooling her mask to reveal nothing of the churning inside her. She did this. With her choices, she brought this on from him, so she won't resent him for it or guilt him. But she's given him so much space and she's dying to earn his forgiveness. She's willing to work to fix all what's broken between them. He just has to help show her how.

"I respect that you're still upset with me," she carefully begins. But she doesn't know how much more of this she can bear.

"I'm not upset."
"Jon…"

"I've given you my loyalty, my sword, my devotion—"

"You haven't actually," she stops him.

"I have," he growls, jaw grinding. "I may not have surrendered the North but you know as well as I that I will fight for you. So what else do you want from me, Daenerys? What do I have left to give?"

It's only the Dragon Queen in her that's brave enough to command, "Your heart." And through her wavering when he faces her finally, reluctant and shuttered from her, she persists, "I want that. I want you by my side."

Shock stumbles him. Then it fades.

"You've got a lot of nerve, don't you, woman?"

"I do."

He nods slowly then, but not like he understands, not like he submits. In a sad dark voice, he asks her, "That woman I knew in the flowers, under the waterfall, was she ever real? I can't tell anymore. What you've done, Dany…"

"What have I done?" she challenges, and at his incredulous look, she insists, "No, Jon, what have I done? I kept your son from you, yes, and I don't expect to be forgiven for that. But I always meant for you to know. The time that passed, it wasn't intentional. You ask if she's real, who you knew, and I understand that question. How could I know if you were still who I thought you were? How could I know if you'd even want him?"

"Of course I want him."

"How could I know?"

"You could've told me and found out!" he yells, snapping suddenly out of his stoic restraints with a surge of motion and emotion. He sends sigil pieces scattering across the carved table, palms slamming down onto it to vent energy, shoulders hunched, head hanging.

She doesn't flinch. "I did."

"Aye, once you had to," he bitterly returns.

She's cold as she corrects him, "I didn't have to. I saw your face, I know what you thought. I could have easily let you believe it. I would have, if I'd chosen to not put my faith in you, to trust that you would love him and protect him and never do anything to endanger him. Because he is in danger, Jon, because we have so many enemies. Think about the way you looked at me that first day. Think of the words you said. Can you not see why I would be afraid, even just for a moment?"

"You honestly thought I'd ever use him against you?"

"Or take him from me. Or tell the wrong person about him. Or not want him at all. Or let your disdain for fathering a bastard color the way you treat him. I had doubts. That is all. I've been betrayed so many times by men I thought I knew. I've made it my habit to be vigilant with honorable men, because sometimes their honor makes them do awful things. What if you thought I was a monster and it was your duty to get him away from me? What if, a thousand different questions. I let fear rule me for the first time since I was a child. I've never been a mother, not this way. My dragons
were never this defenseless. For the first time, I had this creature in my arms, something I love more than the world, and he wasn't a dragon. *He's my baby.* Do you not understand why that paralyzed me?"

He reveals that he does, that he can't argue it, merely by the way he avoids it. Refusing to look at her, still hung stiffly over the table, at last rasping earnestly, "You broke it. What we had."

"Did I? Was it me that broke us?" she demands, eyes narrowing, chin lifting, fire alight. She moves step by step towards him, almost closing the distance. "I'm not the one that chose to freeze you out."

"That's not what I—"

"That's what you did."

"All your talk of knowing my heart, trusting what I'm made of, it was meaningless," he argues instead, because he knows she's right.

"I meant as I said. Doubts in the worst part of me don't change that. Insecurity from a very long and unpleasant history does not change that." Then she looks him up and down in distaste and the resentment she'd told herself she wouldn't allow. "You are a hypocrite, Jon Snow. You've done the same."

"I've had more reason to than you," he asserts, but it's soft, halfhearted.

"Why?" She's growing scornful. "Because you have no dragons? Because you have less power? Because you're a man?"

"You know that's not why," he growls.

Archly, but pained, "Do I? Would you even be aware of it if it were the reason? I've dealt with enough men both infuriated and attracted to what I represent. I thought you were better than that, but I could've been wrong. Do you think Daario would chase after me if I wasn't the *Dragon Queen* and such a great conquest to him? Do you think he would have any interest in me without my name or my armies or my dragons?"

"We weren't talking about attraction," he says, his jaw gone tighter, grinding at the mention of the mercenary's name. "We were talking about trusting each other and our respective positions of power, weren't we?"

"Yes, and you were making the claim you had reason to doubt me as queen, while I had none."

"That's not what I said."

"It is, in fact."

"I just meant—"

"I know what you meant. I've been speaking with Davos. I understand how the vile things the world says about me have conflicted you. I've heard the slurs and the slander all my life, and that was before I took real power and started making proper enemies. I understand that you don't agree with the things I've done."

"It's not that," he sighs, sounding suddenly very tired. "What you envision for this world, what you fight for, it's the noblest thing I've ever seen. It's incredible." And then, "But the way you go about it, Dany? Aye, that gives me pause. I mean, for fuck's sake, shouldn't it? You took your dragons and
you *decimated* the Braavosi army just to execute their leader and replace him with someone you puppet."

"I regret that, I do. If I could do it again, I would handle it differently. But they made themselves my enemy. Because of my bloodline, because of my laws, for the sake of their money at the expense of people's suffering. I would fight differently, but I would fight for the same outcome. I did not raze their city or slaughter their innocents. I met their army on a battlefield and I destroyed them. Those soldiers shouldn't have had to die, yes, but *no soldiers* should have to die. I hope to take the world to a point where that could be true."

"A world under your rule, reigned your way?"

"Not only my way," she counters.

"It's a fine line," is all he says to that.

And her anger reignites, sparking bright. "Do you believe any of this has been easy for me? That I wanted it this way?"

"I don't know. That's the problem. I was so sure of what I knew. And now…"

"That's right, *you don't know*," she replies, reaching for him. Fingers curving hard at his arm, she yanks at him to get him twisting, to make him look at her. She's so angry. And helpless. And she hates him for that feeling. Whatever she'd told herself she would be in this moment, she's none of it. "You've no idea what it was like for me, or my people, or what I had to do to get back to you."

"Back to me?"

"Yes, Jon, *back to you!*" she exclaims, teeth gritted, bared. All the ice around her breaks apart under his harshness, his rejection, chest heaving, wild, completely unlike herself. Remnants of the queen that had stood between them, that had protected her, breaks apart, bares her down to the natural. It frightens her so much that she recoils from it. She whips around and forces the room between them, feeling lost.

In a calmer voice, she tells him, "There are things I must consider as Daenerys Targaryen. And then there are things I would like to do, to have for myself, to behave a certain way, as just Dany. Those two often conflict. But I am *always* an exiled queen at war before I am a woman with people she loves."

Silence lands heavy in the aftermath.

After awhile, she feels him come after her. She swivels to meet him, meaning to stand her ground, to breathe deeply and restore her smooth poise. The look in his eyes prevents that. Intent and intense. The way he moves into her, prowling after her, makes her step away before she can stop herself. The queen is forgotten, and the woman responds instinctively, cornered and anticipating and wary.

It's a darker look than he's ever given her, but the way his body pushes into her space, forcing her into motion without ever touching her, *that* reminds her of things. That's something she recognizes.

When he's close, he lays a hand low to her stomach and urges her that last bit backward. Pins her to the stone half wall of the veranda. Cages her in with his body, leaning down, leaning close, just shy of kissing. Her heart beats unevenly, tripping her breath. His other hand comes up, hesitating when it once would've grabbed her face and fisted her hair. His fingers furl in the air to keep himself from the reflex, knuckles dusting faintly over her cheekbone instead. His thumb rubs circles on her stomach.
through the thickness of her grey gown. His eyes keep hidden under his black lashes, his thoughts closed to her.

"You didn't trust me. As I didn't trust you."

It almost feels like a truce, but not quite.

"If I didn't trust you in some way, I wouldn't have named you my successor," she contradicts, voice tremulous. "It was more complicated than that."

"Aye. You trusted me to fight the war. You didn't trust me with our son."

"I'm sorry."

As she goes to lay her palms to his chest, he catches her wrists, spreads her arms, presses them into the stone edge. He hadn't meant to kiss her, but she arches against him when he traps her, crushing her mouth to his in a harsh hungry message. He starts to pull back and she follows, doesn't let him go, kissing him with demanding intensity. He bites her bottom lip, exhales a ragged breath into her, quaking with it.

And then whatever had held him back for so long cracks. His fingers drag up the lines of her arms and curve around the straining column of her throat, thumb under her chin. He crushes suddenly into her, from knees to shoulders, so forceful the stone cuts painfully into her spine. Imprints on her skin.

Daenerys bunches her hands into the leather at his sides, bucking when his thigh drives between her legs, lifting her slightly. He kisses her with violence, pulling at her gown until the front parts open and he can graze rough hands up and down her contours, searching for the changes. Jon dominates her, when the blood rises, when the wolf howls, when the dragons sing.

Then he deserts her. Abruptly wrenching himself away, gesturing unsteadily to keep her in place when she wants to follow.

"Jon—"

"You let me believe you were fucking your mercenary."

"My body is mine to do with what I choose," she reprimands, meeting his lashing furiousness and frustration with equal measure instead of explaining herself. Why is he struggling so hard to hold onto his blame? She stalks after him as he backpedals into the war room. "It just so happens that my body only wants yours."

"You've a funny way of showing it."

"As do you."

"Dany—"

"I don't belong to anyone else," she says suddenly, bringing him up short, his anger finally faltering with the sharpness of it. Making him look gutted for just a split second with the shine in her eyes, the breaking of her voice as she pleads, "I could never belong to anyone else. Don't you understand that yet?"

What must she do to convince him? What must she do to earn him? She'd done it so easily in that meadow. She tries to remember how. She tries to understand what was so different about her that he could love her then but not now.
It looks as if he'll weaken, for just a moment, but then that solemn guard comes back up between them and she's shut out again. Gruffly, quietly, refusing to let his eyes stray down her half bared body, he tells the queen, "You lit a fire in me. You made me ready to reach for the impossible. For that, I'll always owe you."

"You've a funny way of showing it," she murmurs, echoing him, defeated.

She knows what he's trying to tell her.

But then, with a little pity, Jon offers, "I need time. Leave me be, Dany."

In her dreams, she's haunted by him more now than she ever was across the sea. And she'd held so hard to the craving for him while she was gone. Hope for happiness when she found him again, if he'd survived, if he'd loved her, if they could be a family. She'd dreamed of what it would be like. How it would change things. For her, not the world. How it would change her, chase away the loneliness for the first time in her life. But she made a mistake somewhere. She ruined that.

Chapter 11

When Heaven & Earth Collide

Love is the death of duty.

She's the embodiment of everything he never knew he wanted.

A woman's love, a babe in his arms, and the world can go to hell.

Is that it? Is that what's holding him back from her? Is it why he chose to lose faith in her, to disillusion himself with petty Westerosi whispers, as if they could ever know her better than he got to know her in that meadow? So many hours, so many days, so many weeks spent knowing her. Talking about everything, about what she wants for this world, about what she's willing to do to get it, about what she's done so far. He knew her. He knew her heart. Aye, the words don't hold the same hopeful but horrifying weight of the reality of it, he's found, but it shouldn't have been enough to make him doubt her so badly.

If he'd come into that great hall the first day and said, I missed you, Dany, it's incredible to see your face again, I never thought I'd survive long enough to get back to you but here I am, I'm yours...

She would've trusted in him. She would've brought him to Jaeh. They could've been a united front from the beginning. They would've been a family.

But he shouldn't have had to, should he?

And he couldn't. With his burdens, his responsibilities, he just couldn't. He understands that neither could she, but all that time he spent trying to learn how to bridge the chasm, she'd felt he was freezing her out? She'd felt his questioning her methods and intentions was enough of a concern to warrant hiding his child? She thought, even just a sliver of a thought, even in the recesses of her weakest self, that he could ever be a threat to her and Jaehaerys? He's trying hard, but he can't fathom that. It doesn't reconcile to him with the woman he's known.

He broke her faith in him trying to stay clearheaded.

He made her wonder if she would have to do all of this alone.

From the moment he met her, whatever he does, hold to his anger or melt into his awe, he's never been clearheaded when it comes to Daenerys Targaryen. And the temptation to reach out for what she offers, a final slake for the hollowing loneliness, an unexplainable kinship when he's lived his entire life thinking he'd always be set aside and not belong, is too muddling a prospect with the world coming apart around them. It cannot be what he grabs onto. He can't afford it.

Even if he could forgive her, whether he should or not.

None of this is what he wants. To be king, to lead the nations, to hold the fate of the war for life itself in his hands. To be her king…

No, not that either. She's a glorious thing, the miracle he prayed for, and a great part of him is truly convinced she'll save them all. The thought that she would want him at her side, to share the weight with her, to take care of the soft resilient woman she is and support the wonderful ruthless queen
she's made herself, he can't wrap his head around that truth. Aye, he'd fight for her. He'd take all the weight for her if he could. He'd do everything in his power to take care of her while she gives herself to her causes. But it's not anything he wants.

He doesn't care about ruling the world, or Westeros, or Essos, or anywhere. Aye, he feels the urge to protect people, to fight the fight no one else is willing to, for their sake. But honestly, he doesn't care about leading people to greatness or a better life. He's a little ashamed of it, but it's the way it is. He just wants Dany, and Jaeh, and to go back to that meadow. Or anywhere really. He just wants to be left alone. He just wants some peace.

If it hadn't been for her insistence steeling him, galvanizing him, forcing him forward, and then Sansa's as well, he might've likely let the Night's Watch mutiny allow him escape. He might've just gone south and gotten warm, lived a quiet life, let all these other fuckers worry about the world ending.

Jon can't let himself lose sight of what must be done. He can't let himself sink into her and abandon the world. If he…

Fear claws at his throat every time he looks at her. What if he takes what he wants, what if he takes everything she offers, and he can't bring himself to leave her again? Dany and Jaeh. His family. And they are his family, whatever happens, however strained things are, no matter the decisions they're each forced to make from here out. It frightens him how strong the urge is, how often the thought occurs, that he could pick up his son and pull Dany close and just step on a ship. He could sail them as far east as the world goes and just forget the Great War.

Would he let everybody else go to ice if he gave up his anger for her?

The next time he sees the Second Sons commander, he feels like a fool. He has no reason to, but he does. It's fortunate he sees him from a distance, standing at the green peak of cliff as the mercenary is below, participating in a training session with a fusion of sellswords, Dothraki, and freedmen. If he were face to face with him, with the way he's feeling, irrational and confused, he might do something stupid.

Dany has catered to his request better than he could hope, better than he likes, though he can't admit it. She's all professional, never approaching him, never engaging him at all unless it's in a council meeting. It's what he asked for, respecting his disquiet, but it's the opposite of what he wants, he realizes, growing frustrated with himself and with her and with himself again for being frustrated with her. If she pushed at him, as is her tendency, he'd be aggravated she disregarded his wishes again. But as she gives him space, he's impatient for her to push.

He thinks it just might be this island driving him mad.

He's spent so much time with Jaehaerys, he's surprised his son's not sick of him yet. The babe is likely beginning to think Jon's clingy.

Has he ever had so much free time on his hands? No battle to fight, no duty possible to uphold while he's stranded here, no necessary chores for survival. Nothing but peace and harmony and restlessness. He's not the only one it's affecting, given the fights that break out amongst the men on the ground every other day. It's childish things more than cultural conflicts, just inherently violent people looking to release steam, and the commanders and khals and captains are reprimanded for not controlling their clans when it gets out of hand. But he understands the impulse.
Working in the mine has kept his hands busy, not his head.

It's this mood that lends him to welcoming Missandei's presence as best he knows how when the woman crosses the grass towards him and assures that she hasn't been sent to fetch him for anything. That she just saw him in the distance and sought his company. Which isn't entirely unusual anymore, since Jaeh's led to them spending time together frequently now, but it still leaves him slightly awkward.

He knows it's obvious who he's staring at, but she's too tactful to point it out.

"Was it only to keep me at a distance, so I wouldn't find Jaeh?" he asks, despite trying to resist the impulse, knowing how it looks, hating that he's still occupied by such pettiness. At her questioning look, he sighs, giving up resistance. "She misled me about her involvement with him. She says she's not playing games, but what is that if not a game? Trying to provoke me."

But even as he says it aloud, he realizes he's not quite right. Her words come back to him only after he's said it.

*There's no need to get territorial. He's incorrigible. You keep taking his bait. You don't see his game.*

She'd tried to warn him. He didn't listen.

*You're not a stupid man, Jon Snow. You're naive.*

Now that he's raking it over, he can't pinpoint a time he ever actually saw her interacting with the mercenary at all when it wasn't about warfare. She'd never even spared him a glance, as Jon can recall, beyond as one of her commanders. And yet, he'd taken cues from the man's behavior, not hers, and let his uneven footing with her dig at his less flattering traits. Just as she'd said.

Missandei breaks in, "To my knowledge, Her Grace never wished you to believe she'd taken a lover. On several occasions, she expressed desire to intervene between you. Lord Tyrion presumed, as a grown man, as your own king, you should decide how to handle Daario Naharis for yourself, without the queen's management."

Like he hadn't already felt a fool. Her perfunctory words hit hard.

"Should you be telling me this?" he wonders, worried how she'll feel about her closest confidant speaking out of turn.

Hints of humor in her brown eyes, she explains, "Her Grace wishes I be freely honest with you in any matter I can oblige."

"How did this get to be such a mess?" he mutters, under his breath, to himself, turning back towards the horizon. He feels her follow when he starts walking the edge but he doesn't pay her mind for a long while.

It's not until he offers his hand to help her traverse a rocky decline that the woman's emboldened to venture even more bluntly, "Her Grace needed to reacquaint herself with you as who you both were now. Just as she felt you needed to see that she was not her father's daughter, however it seems, before she could be sure of what she intended. Her children are precious to her, Jaehaerys especially. That instinct that held her back, it's not something there are words for. It's overpowering."

"I get that. I do. I'm trying to understand where she's come from, what she's known that would make her expect such unthinkable betrayal—"
"Yes, Your Grace, but that's the thing. It's not unthinkable. The world has proven that to her. To us all."

"I'm trying, Missandei."

"I'm sure Her Grace appreciates that."

There's something very disarming about the Naathi. Something trustworthy that puts him at ease in a way he probably shouldn't be. He sees why Dany keeps her close. It's why the words are pulled out of him against his better judgment, against his nature, "Most days, I have no idea what I'm doing. Not as king, not as a father, not as … whatever it is she wants me to be to her. Whatever I want to be to her."

"Do you not know?" she responds, no inflection, but a challenge just the same.

Jon looks off again. "I can't stay much longer. I should be preparing Winterfell, commanding the Wall. My place is in the North. I can't justify remaining when I make no progress. She won't go north until the Lannisters are dealt with and she doesn't need me to accomplish that." And then, quieter, more honest, "How do I leave them?"

"As she left you to go east, I imagine. If you feel strongly you must go, my queen surely would understand."

"She's given me everything she has reason to. When I've asked for more men, more resources, she provided them. So why do I feel so unsatisfied?"

"I cannot answer that, Your Grace."

He gives her a grimacing smile. "Aye, it shouldn't be asked of you."

"You may ask whatever you're compelled to of me." Then, "If I may?"

"Go on."

"Over the moons—" She reconsiders. "Over years in her case, I have observed each of you struggle in the roles you've been destined to. What they require of you. You struggle to be who responsibility demands you be. You struggle to separate that from who you are without your duties. As I myself have had the gift to experience in recent years, it is difficult for someone like my queen to know how to have what she wants and express herself. It's wonderful, but it's painful. When you spend all your life at the hands of monsters, once you're free, once you have choice, making your own decisions for yourself can be … harrowing. And we make a mess of it, and that hurts us, but we never mean for it to hurt those around us. Even when we would like to make someone happy, we often find ourselves a disappointment. We are unsure of how to be who we want to be. We are unsure, despite our heads telling us otherwise, of who can be trusted. We tend to … sabotage ourselves."

"You're the farthest from a disappointment, Missandei," he argues softly, turning to face her instead of leading her, frowning down at her through the brightness of the daylight. He hates this glimpse she's giving him of the dark turmoil behind her serene mask, an awful feeling of helplessness that can't be fought from the outside. And she believes it's the same for her queen? He's known a little of what waits behind Dany's mask, behind her strength and resolve, but only very little. He's had a hard time imagining its extent. Hasn't wanted to imagine its cause. Softer still, he rasps, "So is she. Though I suppose I've done a bloody lousy job of showing it."

"I do not mean to imply you are in the wrong. Her Grace greatly regrets how she has handled things, even if she does not articulate that. I simply wish, personally, that you would keep in mind something
perhaps Her Grace has not made clear."

"Which is?"

"She has never had a partner," she says, so simply.

**Partner.** That's what he'd hoped they could be. In the back of his mind, where he never gave voice, nothing but instinctive. Before he came here, before he saw the true Daenerys Targaryen in action and realized he'd been naïve to assume so. If he was ever going to be her partner, he'd need to work for it.

As hard as she's worked for what is hers.

Missandei tells him, "She has never loved someone in a union of respect and trust or kindness and stability. She has had forms of masters, as I have. She has been owned. So if she is not graceful in this, please do not judge her harshly."

Reluctantly, far too honestly, he finds himself confessing, "The only woman I've loved before, I spent the whole time I knew her lying to her, knowing it would likely end with having to kill her people. I betrayed her, and she shot me full of arrows, and I still loved her long after. I suppose I've no place to judge your queen at all, let alone harshly."

But it's easier to say than it's to do, isn't it?

"I love someone as my queen loves His Grace," she offers suddenly, surprising him. For the first time, her assurance turns to timidity. Speaking at her queen's defense gave her effortless gall where revealing herself leaves her hesitant in her footing. "I have for years but it has taken this long for me to be able to…"

"You weren't ready," Jon supplies, needing to ease that discomfort.

"Yes. And yet life is much simpler for me than Her Grace."

"Aye."

"King Snow—"

"Jon's fine."

"I'd rather not."

"Alright," he exhales, a huff of a laugh.

"I'd like to ask, if I could, what it is about my queen's reigning that troubles you?"

"Nothing," he retorts, too quick to be truthful. And yet, in a way, it is truth.

What troubles me about her reign? he wonders. He's run a litany of points over and over in his head to keep them in mind when coming up against her. But they were points made by the people around him. Some of his own, true, but those were fewer. Every conversation he's had since he got here marked them away, point by point, until he was left with nothing but empty fears. Possibilities, unlikely at that.

In the end, it's not her or her reign that makes him uncomfortable. He's still in awe of her as he was when she first dropped from the sky. More so, seeing her people, hearing their praise, and even their complaint. All he's been able to hold onto is the vague trepidation of such godlike authority. Not that
she'll abuse it, though that should always be a concern, for him and for her, but the sheer existence of it in one person's hands, for better or worse.

He's still unsettled by that notion.

But that's a deliberation of philosophy and politics. It's valid, but now that he's had her words replaying in his thoughts for days, he begins to question whether that's the root of it. Whether that's all of it.

"There are many prejudices I've been confronted with since I came here."

Missandei frowns. "People have mistreated you?"

"No, no, not—" He exhales in frustration at himself. It's hard to find the words to explain when it's not a coherent thought as much as a creeping sense he's just starting to fully comprehend. "My own prejudices. I thought I'd come to know myself after my time at Castle Black among men born less fortunate. I may have been a bastard, but I grew up alongside a lord's children, in a lord's keep. I never went hungry. I always had a warm place to sleep. Money wasn't a problem to me. I was educated as a lord's son. Joining the Night's Watch was the first time I came face to face with that privilege I hadn't known I had, surrounded by boys that weren't given the same opportunities I was. And my time with the wildlings after I worked through the things I felt and thought of them because of how I was raised. There are things you assume all your life without ever giving thought to. They were savages, ignorant and dangerous, bad people that must be kept out. I don't remember ever being told this. It was just … known."

"But you lived among them," she surmises, "and you saw that they were no different than you. Not the same, but no different."

"Aye."

"You felt the same way about us? Freedmen and Dothraki?"

"Dothraki, yes. The rest of you, no. But I think I might've felt the same about her," he confesses, nodding up towards the imposing keep in the distance. "When we first knew each other, she told me exactly who she was. She showed me. Turns out, I hadn't really listened. Seeing her here ruling court, leading a war, being the queen I hadn't yet seen her as, it proved that, didn't it? I doubted her, as she doubted me. My concerns were valid, I believe that, but she may've been right. Without knowing it, some of those misgivings may very well have been driven by prejudice."

"Because she's a woman?"

"Because she's a Targaryen," he corrects. "Because she's a foreigner from a world I know nothing about. Because everything she stands for goes against everything the world I grew up in is built upon. I'm not saying it's built on good things. I'm not saying what she stands for isn't admirable. It's just too different. It seems so … unrealistic."

"Unrealistic," Missandei echoes. "The Mother of Dragons is real. The people she's given new life to, a new world to, are real. The changes she's wrought are real. It will take much work still to sustain, as Her Grace says, but it is real."

"Aye."

"So are these things unrealistic? Or are they just uncommon?"
"This is not a game," she thunders, silencing the dozen bickering voices.

Across the war room, Tyrion sinks back sharply in his seat and she feels a pang of remorse. But she will not have this argument again. They know how she feels. Highborns playing games with each other while the smallfolk suffer for it is the whole reason she's fighting this war. Aside from their very survival, before and after the threat of the Night King has come, that will always be the truth. Cersei won't care, but Daenerys won't wait her out, blockading and starving her people. It's not their fault. She won't let them suffer in this war more than they must.

That means she cannot play the game of thrones.

That means she must find a way to end the pretender queen without destroying her capital or waiting her out.

Her Essosi advisors throw variations of the same suggestion. "Do as you did in Yunkai." Sabotage the usurper from the inside out. Reach her people within the capital, turn them against her, infiltrate them, inspire them to do the final work for her. "Incite rebellion from the people within as you did in Yunkai. Let them fight for their own freedom."

Her Westerosi advisors are firm in their assurances of that tactic's failure. "The lords and the lowborn both are sheep. Cersei's sheep. She's poisoned them too thoroughly against you. The ones that aren't too greedy are too fearful to ever go against her. She's made sure they will never see you as the lesser evil."

And Jon Snow, exasperated and brusque as always, is on his feet, coiled tight with thwarted energy when he interjects, "There's no time for this! You can't safely lay siege to King's Landing when she'll always be willing to sacrifice more than you. Any plan will take too long to see through. We need to be focused north."

As he has stated a hundred times before.

So the strategizing turns away from conquest and onto compromise. A trip Beyond the Wall. That's what they want. That's what they're telling her. Tyrion's plan. Another one of her Hand's plans she so despises. An armistice. A way to come together with their enemies and fight as one. She doesn't believe it will sway a privileged madwoman like Cersei, who's already proven she cares nothing for the lives of her own people, but she's willing to try.

If it does not cost her too much.

"Cersei Lannister will never surrender, even if your dead men are real."

"And she must die," a vicious Sand Snake snarls, fingers around her dagger at the thought as her sister adds agreement.

The Reach representatives are just as firm on this, but the rest of her council is more levelheaded. Daenerys tends to agree with the revenge seekers, just from a practicality standpoint, never mind getting into the justice of it. But she hears out the alternatives just the same. If it spares King's Landing a destructive siege, she's perfectly willing to allow Cersei Lannister to keep her head, until the right time comes to take it from her. After all, she's already been forced to prove she's not a woman of her word when it comes to her enemies, or the enemies of her people, so it's not as if she has something like Jon Snow's honor to lose.

The problem is, she isn't quite convinced that woman would surrender to save her own children, if they lived. And the one who knows her best is her brother, and Daenerys cannot trust Tyrion's words
on the matter. Not for betrayal, but for bias. As much as he claims to hate his sister, she sees the love beneath the loathing, the guilt at being made more of a kinslayer, and the desire whether he's conscious of it or not to find a way to save his family at this conflict's end.

She knows the dangers the Night King poses to her dragons. She will not go, under any circumstances.

Jon and Daario offer up a suicide mission, trying to outdo each other in their stupid bravery. No, their recklessness. The Sand Snakes are excited by the idea. Her advisors, who should be speaking sense right now, all fall in line with support for such a mission. So it's the queen that must swiftly shut it down. It's not worth the risk, not when she's seen them for herself and understands the danger so viscerally. Not when she has strong doubts about Cersei Lannister even caring of the threat, real or fictitious. She can't imagine a woman that would scour her own capital with wildfire being the kind of ruler that would come together in the face of even something as dire as the Night King's march south.

"There must be a better way."

"If there isn't?"

She regards them all over the carved table. "Then it doesn't happen."

"I've put my trust in you, despite everyone warning me against it, despite all the reasons you've given me not to," Jon argues. "Trust in me."

They all stare. She wavers before them, stuck in his earnest gaze, his imploring, his intensity, fingers gripping the edge of her chair to the point of pain.

Give him this, a traitorous voice in her head tempts. The weak girl in her. Give him whatever he wants. Give him this and he may forgive you.

She wavers, and then she resolves, face made of ice. "No."

The room exhales, surprised, awkward, disappointed. Tense, they look from him to her and back again, unmoving.

She sweeps a scathing gaze across them all. "Bring me a strategy with stronger odds and I will let you leave."

"Let me? I am a king."

"You're free to try swimming, my king, because your ship will remain with me," Daenerys declares. Fire and ice in her, the Dragon Queen absolute.

Shock stares back at her. Dread, wariness, the resurgence of all that he had put aside to convince her, distrustful, unforgiving. He's shocked at the hard line, her making it clear where they truly stand, whatever she may allow him to believe. She's sure he's thinking the very worst of her again, but she won't change her mind. Her cut down of his first true stance as a king doesn't look good, his push for his own authority here, but it's the wrong time to do it. She's not going to let him go off and die, whatever kind of tyrant and liar they think that makes her.

"Am I your prisoner?" he wants to know, cutting through the loaded quiet.

The queen forces her face to remain unaffected, her tone cool, saying simply, "Call it what you like."
It takes every bit of control she has to keep seated, to keep cold, when he looks her up and down in
disgust and turns his back, storming out. She dismisses her council and breathes out only once she's
alone. She melts dejectedly in her chair, wishing for her son to distract her from the pain in her chest.
The desire to scream.

She won't let him sail off to get killed. Let him hate her for it if he must.

She'd rather raze King's Landing to the ground than ever send Jon Snow Beyond the Wall on his
own. She'd rather give up the crown.

"The imp told me this was your favorite spot for brooding," Daario quips, coming up behind him at
the edge of the cliff.

Jon sends him a sidelong look from under his scowling brow, takes note of the long fall and
contemplates the childish urge to push him over. "Tyrion sent you? Or was it your beloved queen?"

"Your beloved queen," Daario corrects, merciless. But then amusedly says, "She wouldn't send me
after you. She doesn't trust me with you. Thinks she has to guard you from me, like I might hurt her
precious wolf king."

" Wouldn't you? If you could."

"If I could," he admits easily. "But I can't, can I? She'd feed me to her dragons."

There's a petty surge of satisfaction in him at that assurance, both men knowing just how true it is.
He's never thought himself a jealous man, considering he spent his life with countless reasons to be.
But the way Dany treats her Second Sons commander, the latitude she allows him, and just the very
way the flippant man carries himself around her gets under Jon's skin.

"While I'm being honest, I'd like to state that I'm not impressed with the man she's chosen for herself,
for better or worse."

The satisfaction sours. "Is there something you need from me, sellsword?"

"Seems more like you need something. Maybe a good beating to get you over your pride and hurt
feelings."

Pushing him over the cliff is becoming more and more appealing. "What is it you think you know
about me?"

"About you? Not much. But I know your kind. Some lord's bastard with an inferiority complex and
an overvalue on virtues. You're boring, North King, and you don't know as much as you think you
do. What I know is that you're not right for her. But you're important, so I won't get rid of you." The
mercenary has no pity. He may seem flippant, but Jon would be stupid to not see seriousness beneath
the surface. "Daenerys almost had a king before, you know. She had a khal before I knew her, and
once I already had her, she was going to have a husband. For her city's sake, she intended to make a
king out of a sniveling slave master in Meereen. I outlasted him. And when you're gone, when you're
done breaking her heart, I'll be here to console her."

"You don't know anything about me," Jon informs him, calmly but not kindly. He wouldn't know
what to punch him for first if he let his words settle in as anything more than gravely misguided.
"You don't know her. You see what you want of her and ignore all the rest. If you think she'll ever
let you use her to fulfill your fantasies, with or without me, you're the fool, not me."
"I didn't track you down to argue our intentions," Daario dismisses. Demands, "What are you doing out here when she needs you up there talking her into what she'll have to do next?"

"Why don't you talk her into it?" he challenges.

"The queen knows better than to listen to me by now."

Jon turns from him, facing the horizon as his stewing thoughts return to him. "She's made all our roles here clear, hasn't she? My advice holds little weight."

"She's trying to protect you, idiot."

"That doesn't change the effect. I'm no king to her, I'm a captive. I'm only equal so long as I do as she likes. How can I ever trust her promises?"

"How can she trust yours?"

"I've never lied to her."

"No?" Daario turns to leave him, throws over a shoulder, "You sure about that, North King?"

The last thing he feels like right now is seeking her out. She just humiliated him. Though it's not really that bit he cares about, it still makes a difference. She made all her own words to him hollow. She calls him king and then commands him like nothing more than another one of her soldiers. She imprisons him on this island. To protect you.

Aye, he knows, but the why doesn't matter. He'd asked her to prove her promises and trust in him, so what did she do? Threw it back in his face.

Yet here he is.

"You know it's our best option," he says, following Missandei into the queen's chambers to find her out on her veranda, Jaeh napping in his crib. Her scribe backs out and seals the door, leaving them alone, but the queen doesn't turn. "A siege of the capital would take too long, starve too many innocents, and you won't attack outright because you know the collateral would be too high in such a populated condensed fortress. If you won't leave off this war and come north with me, you and I both know a ceasefire is our only smart route. Any chance of convincing the Lannisters lies with showing them firsthand what we all face. And sending your men without me would be a waste of the mission. I'm the only one that's been Beyond the Wall. I'm the only one the wildlings will follow."

"Perhaps there's a way to lure a small group of wights near the Wall, away from their masses," she offers uncertainly, hesitantly, chin turned a little towards her shoulder. He can see a sliver of her profile, enough to make out the stress winding her up.

"That would be ideal," he gives her gently, before pointing out, "I can't think of it, so if you've an idea of how that might be, I'm eager to hear."

"Jon," she huffs, frustration flaring.

"I've been Beyond the Wall. I was a Night's Watch ranger. I embedded with the wildlings to sabotage their invasion. I spent a long time north of the Wall then. If anyone will succeed at this, it
"No," she declares, cold Dragon Queen again. He watches her hands slide across the stone ledge as
she leans forward against it, sunset haloing her silver waves and green dress, her pale back exposed
from the cutout. His feet take him the rest of the way across the room until he stops at the threshold.
Held back by the other side of the coin, the quiet vulnerability in her voice when she says, "The last
time, the only time I was north, I nearly lost my son. He could've killed Drogon. I've never seen
anything truly hurt my dragons. Until that day."

"Dany…"

"You will not go north, Jon Snow. You will not cross the Wall."

"I can do this—"

"Not for me, especially for Cersei Lannister," she snarls. Her fingers have curved the stone edge and
it cuts into her skin. The sight pulls him finally the last few steps between them. "It's unnecessary.
The risk is not worth it. I do not intend to tell my son I lost him his father this way." He leans into her
back, lets her feel whatever solid strength he can offer her now, and lays his hands over each of hers,
softening the grip. It turns her voice small. "Please don't fight me for this. I will not change my
mind."

The anger in him evaporates. For this moment, in this case, leaving aside the broader implications, he
just can't be angry with her.

He's so weary, he doesn't have it in him.

*We mishandled the situation horribly,* he wishes he could say. Neither of them knew how to navigate
meeting again after so much had happened, meeting from their new positions of power. He sees that.
He does. He'll try to remember it when the anger returns. *We both are owed another chance in our
own ways, and there is no time for it,* he realizes. *Because the war won't wait. The Night King won't
wait.*

"Alright, Dany," Jon murmurs, dropping his nose into her hair. "Alright, love."

She's right. It's not worth it.

If he held it against her, he'd be the hypocrite she accuses him of. He can't ever imagine letting
Daenerys within a thousand leagues of the Night King or his undead.

"This is where I was born," she tells him, ending the fleeting serenity after awhile of heavy silence.
"The place my mother died and any semblance of a childhood was stolen from me."

"I know."

"You don't though. I never told you. I didn't want you to see my weakness."

"You're the farthest thing from weak I've ever found," he says with a slight smile against the nape of
her neck.

"Missandei has been suggesting I share more."

"Alright."

"When I spoke of my early past, I never went into detail. I made it seem…"
"So tell me," he encourages, understanding what she can't put to words.

"Here, on the same day, I came into this world a princess in the greatest dynasty there's ever been, and I became a worthless orphan." She speaks slowly, full of purpose and soft emotional honesty. "A pauper, begging for food and shelter, hiding from a usurper king's assassins."

"I'm sorry."

She has been owned.

As she says what she says next, he's reminded of her cautious stories from the Great Grass Sea. Of her first son, whose life was given in favor of her dragons. Rhaego, she'd said she'd named him. When she was still a child herself, traded off to a violent savage like property. She'd said her husband had fallen in love and gentled with her eventually, but she'd still been property. And as property, her babe wouldn't have been hers. In the end, had he survived, Jon has the stark punch of realization that she would've had no say over her own child. No control, no way to protect him, because he would've been his father's son, not hers.

Jon's gone cold against Dany.

Those choices he hadn't been able to wrap his head around, they're suddenly a lot less confounding to him. If nothing else, less confounding.

"Before my brother sold me to my khal, I'd been passed around and bartered over so many times, for so many reasons, I didn't count them all. All my life, all I had was my name and my beauty. They both brought more grief to me than they aided me. People think of me as the exiled princess, but I spent more time in the slums than I did in a manse or a palace. I had no family, I had no home. I never knew where I would be safe. I never knew how to protect myself." Breaking apart their interlocked fingers on each side, she swivels within the cage of his arms, looking up at him without disguise, wanting him to look back. Wanting him not to flinch. "The closest thing I had to someone that loved me was my brother, who abused me and molested me and never let me forget how much I owed him for his presence."

Jon doesn't say a word when she stops. She has to stop, to swallow, to smooth out her face again when it starts to fracture. She puts her hands shyly to his shoulders and slides them precisely down his chest, focusing on that. He wants to gather her up and distract her. He wants to say something that will help, to make sure she knows just how harshly her old wounds pain him, but she doesn't need his words. She needs him to listen. She needs him to see her for who she is.

"I've been raped and betrayed and chained and cursed and abandoned. Everything that I am was built out of ashes. All the supposed glory of my identity, the innocence I'd tried to hold onto, the softness, the hope, it was all defiled. Over and over again. I crawled and clawed myself up to where I am now. I will not let anyone take that from me. And for the power I have now, I'm meant for greater things. I owe that to the world, to do all I can for them, the people that are powerless to protect themselves. Because I can do what no one else can, I don't have the right to waste it. If I reached for what I want, only what I want, for myself, I would be wasting it. Because all I want is a family to love and be loved by. I want a safe home and peace. That's all. I don't care about crowns or worshippers, Jon. I just want to go home."

Fate, it seems, is quite a bitch.

The raven comes in the dead of night.
It's only a stroke of luck that it doesn't get ignored until morning. Luck that it's Missandei who happens to be in the room when it's received, visiting the maester for a tonic while he's tending the rookery in the Sea Dragon Tower. Because Missandei is the only one smart enough to be willing to wake her queen, to gather them immediately in the war room, to summon Jon Snow.

When she fell asleep, it was in his arms, their baby between them. His fingers had spent hours tunneling comfortably through her hair, his thumb rubbing at her cheek, her jaw, her lips. When she woke, he was gone, her mother's vast royal bed empty but for Daenerys and little Jaeh.

She leaves her son under Jhiqui's care and takes her seat at the head of the carved table. The dark night at her back, the room flickering with candlelight, it's only the five of them when Jon picks up the scroll and reads the plea for help from his long lost brother. The wild claims in that scroll, it's a lot to absorb. She understands why he goes utterly still, breathless, stricken and dazed. Bran Stark is alive and returned to Winterfell. Bran Stark is calling himself a greenseer and insists to know things he couldn't possibly know.

"It's likely a trick," Varys mentions carefully.

"No one's heard of the Stark girl since before her father's execution," Tyrion retorts. "She could be anywhere in the world by now. It's not entirely improbable that she found herself too far north."

"Why would she ever go there?" Davos wonders. "Wouldn't she go home?"

"It doesn't matter how she came to be Beyond the Wall," Daenerys intercedes. Softly, sympathetically, staring at the king. "Only that she is."

Jon has slackened in shock and horror and defeat. "Arya," he exhales finally. Then, "There's no way I can get up there in time." The shield of duty and reason shatters, and with every selfish vehemence in him, he turns desperately to her, letting the scroll drop from his fingers. "Dany…"

They all look to her once more, worried, bewildered. They can see her weakness, she's sure. They can see her giving in under his pleading eyes. This is Arya, he's thinking, and it's all over his heartick face. She remembers his words in that shack. She remembers how his voice sounded when he spoke of the girl. She remembers the person he ever loved most in the world. This is Arya. The thing he'd never ask of her, he's asking. He'll get down on his knees and beg if she holds out.

This isn't about a vain reach for armistice. This is saving her child's aunt.

Regretful, the queen hangs her head, turning away in frustration even as the resigned determination steels her. With a deep breath, she surges out of her chair the next moment. Ignoring their protests, face smooth, she orders in Dothraki, "Bring the khal his weapon." And her guard disappears down the corridor. She strides out past them all, leaving Jon to follow, and everyone else to chase at their heels, trying to talk sense and reason and caution into her.

Despite her misgivings, despite all her fierce oaths, Daenerys ends up on a rescue mission Beyond the Wall.

She tries to tell the smaller two to stay behind, but Drogon beckons them forth, overriding her command to his siblings.

Night has passed and half the day is gone before Drogon finds them. As the valley of white comes into sight, a rush of horror hits Daenerys. Hundred thousand black spots swaying amidst the
whiteness, hundred thousand at least. A smaller swarm climbing up the jagged walls of an icecap at the center of the frozen lake, where a dozen burly men swing battleaxes and war hammers and a flaming sword, hacking at the dead that won't stop coming. And a tiny girl in the middle of them that must be Arya Stark.

Jon's arm tightens around her waist as he sees what she sees. While his siblings circle and scour, Drogon lays a path of fire, diving after it, landing hard enough to jostle the icecaps, frozen ground cracking under him as he stumbles. Jon lets go of her and is gone before the dragon even settles, skidding down his heaving side and rolling to get to his feet, sword drawn. He cuts his way through what's not burning to reach the embattled living.

The girl fights so smoothly, so quickly, spinning and slicing in a much more graceful dance than her brother's deft brutality. She's so smooth, in fact, she doesn't realize the girl is injured until Jon clears a path and beckons her down off the icecap. Her jump falters, her leg giving out, one arm held to her body, useless, kept out of the way. Jon catches her midair, his sword breaking a wight in half from the other direction, pulling Arya down into his side. Barely left on her feet, he holds her so tight.

Five reach them at once and lunge. She pushes free of her brother with a hand to his chest and a twirling leap, landing on her good foot, long skinny blade arcing through their necks. He fells the rest.
"Go!"
"You go," she counters, unaltering.
"Tormund!" he barks, as the men are flooding off the icecap after her and racing toward the raging dragon.

The queen hadn't even noticed he was among them until he's breaking off from the rest and snatching up the girl out of her battling. "Let's go, wee killer," he shouts over Drogon's roar.

Daenerys wrenches her eyes off Jon, forcing herself to focus past the panic. Reaching down and clasping the girl's hand when Tormund hoists her upwards, she pulls her close until Arya Stark is mounted behind her astride the dragon's spine. The strange men clamber desperately after her until everybody is on. Everybody but Jon.

When Viserion is struck down, his mother can't move. She can't help him. Can't even touch him. He spirals through the misted sky with a wail, blood and fire mingling in his wake, and she freezes. Freezes through to the bone. In shock. A scream sticks in her throat with talons. Roaring in her ears. It's not real. She doesn't understand what she's seeing when he falls. When his eyes shut and he slips beneath the ice.

It's not real.

"Jon!" Arya screams, angry and terrified, but her brother has shaken loose from his horrorstruck disbelief watching the dragon fall and has slipped once more into that red haze. The cold killing fury when he meets Daenerys's eyes, sees the pain in her face, and then turns and wades his way through a battlefield of dead men.

She wants to call him back, scream for him with his sister, but she has no voice.

Halfway across the lake, something changes. He's been fighting his way insanely to the Night King on his ledge, but suddenly he stops. He backpedals. Urgency and wildness take him. He shouts, "Go, go, go! Drogon, fly! Sôvēs!"
She falls forward onto his neck as he lurches at the command, catching spikes to steady herself, yelling, "No!" Fighting him through their bond. But he listens to Jon. Takes to the sky. In an instant, she ferociously regrets ever teaching her old lover Valyrian directives. She's never felt so powerless on the back of the most dangerous creature in the world. She can't make him stay.

And Jon can't reach her.

For a wild second, impulse almost makes her throw herself off before they ascend too high. But that's desperate instinct and she can't let it rule her. She's better than that. She tightens her grip and watches helplessly as Jon Snow gets overtaken, down on the ground where she can't get to him, where she can't save him. The girl at her back thrashes, spitting vicious things at them as big men hold her forcibly in place, and the woman can relate.

Jon goes under, like her son, and they fly off without him. They leave them both to the ice. She leaves them.

_It's not real._

She must still be dreaming, back at Dragonstone, Jon beside her, Jaeh between them in her mother's bed. She must be dreaming.

It doesn't end like this. It doesn't.
Chapter 12

Ashes to the Ground

Eastwatch is a barren wasteland. It suits her, for the queen's fire has all burned out and she's become ice the whole way through. She feels … numb.

When they land, men fall to the snow, lumbering inside the dilapidated structure with their wounds and their soiled weapons and their snarling prizes. Daenerys doesn't move. She keeps her palms pressed to the warm vibrations of Drogon's hide, feeling the frozen aches from the wind's bite. Rhaegal drops beside him, shaking the earth, and his neck drops to come under Drogon's chest, his snout scrubbing the underside of his brother's jowls with a keening cry before Drogon snaps him away, his hurt and anger and ugliness searing inside of her. His need for fire and blood. The hollowness he already knows that any vengeance could hold.

The girl is the last to go. She's as unmoving as Daenerys for awhile, before her arm finally retracts from the queen's waist and she turns to ease herself down the dragon's side without a word. There are no words. There's just … the silence in the roaring white that seems so endless.

It's almost dark and she's half hypothermic by the time she breaks somewhat from her stupor and forces herself to dismount and go inside. There's a bed by a fire and bread and stew awaiting her, but she can't eat and she can't feel the heat. She sleeps in blackness, no dreaming, only the howl of the wind rattling at old wood and distant screeches from her children in the night.

Rhaegal has flown south, looking for somewhere warm to rest and whimper and wallow in his wounds, but Drogon stays close, circling the sky, searching for things to kill, destruction to be wrought.

In the daylight, men make plans around them, but Daenerys and Arya are silent. They want to gather their supplies and ride south. Instead, she mounts Drogon and soars laps around the icy wilderness, expanding outward, searching from the misty grey of the clouds for any sign. She doesn't dare return to the frozen lake, where the Night King and his charred army awaits. He took Viserion right out of the sky, one shot, one spear. She doesn't dare. But she gets as close as she can, circling, searching. For what, she's not sure. For hope, somehow, for something.

Eventually, her son lands at Eastwatch in defeat. She steps on the lift and goes to the top of the Wall. The top of the world. The edge of it, the end of it, nothing but cold and white and ice, no life to this place. She can't imagine how miserable it must have been for Jon to spend so many years banished here.

She stands in the crow's nest for hours. She doesn't come down. Not when a ship arrives from Dragonstone, not when Arya Stark comes to stand in somber silence beside her, wrists crossed behind her back, pretty face a smooth mask like the queen's. It feels less lonely with the girl here, but it makes the grief worse.

Before she leaves her, Arya Stark says strangely, "Every hurt is a lesson. Every lesson makes you better." As if she's reminding herself.

"That's been my experience," Daenerys agrees. But it means nothing to her now. Her eyes don't leave the white horizon.
Davos joins her for awhile. He talks but she doesn't hear him.

Grey Worm chooses a post at the lift. His presence behind her is a familiarity that should reassure her, if anything could. He doesn't say a word, but he stays. Through the day, and the next too. She knows the cold doesn't affect her as badly as it does other people. She knows he must be in pain. If she were herself, it would be enough to draw her down, for his sake, but she's not herself anymore.

Jhiqui comes as well to attend her, brought up by the big redhead. It should give her questions, push her from her numb isolation, but the fact that it is not Missandei in her place lets her know not to worry about Jaehaerys.

"Khaleesi—"

"No." She's not going anywhere. "I did not cross the world just for him to die buried under ice in this wretched wasteland." Perhaps it's Tormund's presence that finally draws the words from her. Jon's friend, who's been through so much with him, clawed out of Hardhome beside them. "I did not come this far for it to end like this."

"Nothing's ended, Dragon Queen," he argues, trying to put fire back into her in his gruff awkward way. "You've not lost yet. You're still here. There's still hope."

You're wrong, she won't say.

When she doesn't move, he grumbles, "King Crow wouldn't want his queen freezing up here like a cun—coward. He's gone, but we're not. You're not done fighting yet. He wouldn't be."

No, he wouldn't be. But she's not Jon Snow.

This was never her war. It was his.

How is she supposed to go on without him? To do any of this without him? Fight these wars and build the world she'd intended, alone, on her own. Save their people from the Long Night, from those monsters, and bring them into a better dawn. Raise her son into a good man, a good king, without him. She doesn't want to do that. She's been alone in this all her life. She thought maybe…

She thought that was going to be finally over.

All she sees is Jon and Viserion sinking in the cold black depths.

One of them has to come back.

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The third day, it's the wolf's howl that draws her attention. It mingles with the grieving singing of her dragons in the sky. She turns to find Ghost following her towards the lift. Wanting to come with her. Something about the white wolf slinking after her, something about those red eyes looking up at her. She drops to her knees, buries her face in his fur, arms around his neck.

Her gentlest child is dead. Jon is gone.

Daenerys stands on the Wall once more, staring out at the endless white. Her dragons circle, crying, screaming from above. Ghost presses at her side, keeping her warm, refusing to leave her.

Come back to me, runs through her mind. Like a voice in a dream, like an echo on the wind. Nothing else, none of it matters right now. The wolf makes her feel close to him, closer than his
Hand, than his wildling, closer than his sister had. The shock still sits heavy. She's still numb. It's still not real. None of it. But those words keep running through her mind. One of you. One of you. Come back to me.

In the distance, a rider approaches.

She stands frozen, gripping the rail, refusing to let herself believe it. Until Ghost gets up and bounds away. The first time he's left her since he found her. That's when she knows. That's when she starts running.

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Jon did not rise out of the ice easily. The trek back to her took its toll on his body. Froze him through. He's so cold, his heart has slowed. They panic around him, grim and quick in their tasks, loading him onto the ship, getting him safely into a cabin, stripping him of the wet garments, burying him under dry furs. The garments had hardened solid out of the lake, iced onto his body, so that skin tried to come when they peeled them from him, leaving him chafed and scraped and frostbitten.

He should be dead. His heart should not be beating at all.

How did he survive out there, soaked in a frozen lake, riding in the scouring wind, lost in the deadly snow? It shouldn't have been possible to survive.

Perhaps we breathed fire into him, she thinks oddly, outlandishly, her and her dragons, but she doesn't really care. He did survive. His heart kept beating. He made his way back. That's all that makes a difference.

She tells them to set sail immediately. To leave this dreadful place.

It takes him so long to wake.

While they wait, she lays beside him, unmoving, unspeaking, hoping to share the fire inside her enough to heal him. Hoping for comfort. She knows it's possible he won't want her here, now that his sister is saved, now that the danger is over. The trust she's broken can't be mended. But she's selfish.

For awhile, Arya sits with her, watching over her brother. She puts a chair in the corner, behind Daenerys, so she can look over the room, so she can see the door. Guarding them in some way, the queen thinks.

If she were proper, she would've pulled away from him when the girl came in. She would've pulled her coat back on and laid her mask in place. But she can't bring herself to care. She needs his skin under hers. She needs to feel his heart beating under her hand. She needs to keep breathing and she's afraid she can't do that without his body against hers, reminding her, soothing her.

She just wants to cry, but there are no tears.

"It's my fault," the girl says into the quiet. Slowly, precisely, an oddness to her tone that's sincere but withholds emotion. "You shouldn't have had to come. Your dragon should still be alive. I'm sorry."

She can't respond. She can't find words. Her head lifts a little. Her eyes fall to the girl's hand, resting in her lap, this warrior girl looking so small. She's so young. Daenerys reaches back and slides her fingers over Arya's. Grips the hand tight, trying to tell her what she needs to hear with the touch, because she can't speak.
Wetness tracks silently down her face, onto Jon’s shoulder, and she shudders.

He wakes in the dead of night, on a quiet ship, in a warm bed, rocking with the waves. He wakes from a dream of darkness and death, colder than he’s ever been, choking on water like icicles in his lungs and fire branding his skin. He wakes to Dany sleeping beside him, her leg slid between his, her nose to his throat, her fingers leaving marks on his sore chest. One moment he’s in the future, where everything is dead winter and there’s no sign of it ever being spring again, then he’s in the past, back on that snowy hillside with a beautiful girl that swears she’s a queen.

Where he fell in love with an ultimately softhearted girl that turned into a fearsome conqueror. She’s both, he knows, but that’s still hard to wrap his head around. A compassionate woman and a ruthless ruler. The mother of his son. A mother that's just lost her child.

Jon gathers her tighter in his arms, pressing his lips to her brow when she murmurs in her sleep, thinking, Sorry, so sorry, Gods, what have I done?

His heart hammers so hard, it's impossible to get his breath around it. Senseless distress, panic, aggression. He fights his way to the surface of black water, searching for the light, searching for the sky, searching for air. For what feels like hours, he can't quite reach it. And then it snaps from around him, splintering, and he's thrust jarringly awake. But he still can't breathe.

The pain has settled in his body at every level. His skin, his bones, his meat.

"It's alright." Dany's there, pressed against him in grey morning light, murmuring meaningless comforts as she would to Jaeh. She lays her palm over his heart as it beats toward her, then takes his wrist and lays his own to her chest, between the weave of her dress so he can feel her skin, her measured heartbeat. "We're safe. It's over."

"It's not," he rasps, once he can speak. Once the air is coming in and out again, however harshly. His vision clears by focusing on her. Because he's been unraveled by his dreams, a slurry of disorienting flashbacks, because he's unguarded and thoughtless from it, he's too honest with her. He doesn't hide his despair, his desperation, insisting, "It's just beginning."

Which is when he sees her calm crack. That brave queenly shell cracking open, bringing a shine to her eyes, pain and grief and fear in the twist of her face. "We've..." She falters with a shaky sigh, looks away, fingers flexing sharply around his wrist. She tries to smooth it out quick, but she fails. Still, her chin lifts and her head turns again, and she penetrates him with her own desperation. Determination fueled by sorrow and anger and a wild refusal of what her fear warns her of. "We've come too far. We will destroy them. We will destroy them."

"I'm so sorry—"

"Stop," she cuts him off. Sharp, hard. "You have nothing to be sorry for."

"Viserion—"

"The Night King did that. He did that, not you. And he will pay."

Jon strokes his hands up her neck, across her jaw, palms to her cheeks. She grips his wrists when his fingers tunnel into her tangled hair, holding her head tight, urging her down to him as he arches upwards. He presses their brows together and just lives in that honesty for a moment, for the first
time not pushing it away.

An army that won't stop, won't tire, won't die.

Creatures that can fell a dragon so easily.

Winter that will consume everything in its path. And everything is in its path.

He needs to be focused, steeled, steady. He needs to be focused clearly on the future and this fight. Not looking to the past. Not made shaky and untrustworthy by his own memories. Demons that are coming out now quicker, spurred by any violence, making him fear himself alongside his enemies.

You've got some animal in you, she'd once told him. And in the heat and frenzy of battle, when he's killing, it does feel that way. But what if he's just a man? Something broken.

She's waged war more than he has. And he knows she carries the weight of all her kills on her shoulders. But she's done it from above, apart from the fray, not down on the ground in the muck under the crush of grisly battle. Thank the Gods for it, but she's never been swallowed by a writhing sea of dying terrified men choking each other, murdering each other, climbing over heaps of bodies to breathe. She's never lost sight of the blue sky, buried under so much death.

He doesn't want that to touch her. He doesn't want to explain. He doesn't want her to know what he sees in his dreams.

But she seems to anyway.

Somewhere along the way of losing himself in his thoughts and hearing her soft fervent whispers of promise and reassurance, her reflexive soothing, he falls into kissing the woman. Rubs his nose against hers. Presses his mouth to hers. Teeth catch her lightly before he licks over her lips when they part on a gasp. She shudders above him, her weight bearing down on him at last as she melts into him. He feels her relief and surprise at his welcoming in such a palpable way that it leaves him wanting to kick himself for some inexplicable reason.

He's too tired. He misses her too much. He needs her too fiercely right now. He's tired of so much blame and suspicion and indecision on both sides. He's tired of being king, learning how to deal with a queen that's at once both rival and ally. Later, he'll learn more. He'll stand his ground truer. Later, he'll prove to her everything she deserves to understand, the lengths he's willing to go.

Now, he just needs Dany, and he knows she needs him.

"I'm sorry," he says hoarsely against her tongue, arms winding around her waist, barring at the small of her back, pulling her down firmer. He wants to fix it. He wants to find the words that will ease her loss. "It'll be alright." But there are none.

Just as Dany's history informs her choices and hesitations, the inner scars keeping her from being free, Jon's trauma hasn't begun to be processed, he's reluctantly come to realize. He understands what drove her, but keeping him from Jaeh brought up all the old insecurities and feelings of separation. He had a family, who loved him as he loved them, but he was always apart somehow, always an outcast to some degree. They've both spent their lives as outcasts.

The fog of war clinging on him, Ygritte's death and his part in it, failing to save Rickon when he'd been so close…

He's still haunted, and very much influenced by the impact of those things, he suspects, even when he isn't aware of it. His battles, with the dead, with the living. His mistakes and shame. Father, Robb,
Arya, Sansa, the boys. Sansa was sold, passed around, tormented. He should've protected her. She should never have ended up in Bolton hands. And Arya, Gods know what she's gone through all this time, when it was his job to protect her. He didn't, he failed them all, he abandoned them, because of oaths now made meaningless. Because of what the world he'd always known told him of how it should be.

Between Dany and the Long Night, he's been shown the light. He's said fuck off to the ways of the world that had seemed so set in stone all his life. Broken free of their constraints. Maybe it's just a part of him becoming a man, growing pains to weather, shaking off the limitations and prejudices of his roots. But it doesn't change the facts, does it? If he's done that now, he could've done it then, back when it would've counted more. When he could've helped them.

Now he's surrendered the remnants of resistance he'd been clutching. Now he's got Dany, he's got Jaeh, he's got Arya and Sansa. Just in time to lose them to the Night King. Or die and leave them undefended. He hadn't understood it at the start, but this was part of what had paralyzed him, just as Dany had been paralyzed at the thought of giving up even a little of the power to guard her child.

"Okay?" she asks, almost voiceless, panting into each other's mouths, pulling back some when he winces.

Jon curves a hand under her hair, over the nape of her neck, keeping her from getting too far. He runs the knuckles of his free hand down her throat, over her chest, following the line of her dress. The clasp comes undone and he pushes the pieces apart to expose her. Rasps, "Yeah."

Dany hooks one leg over his thighs, coming to kneel astride him, helping him shuck the dress off her shoulders, spine bowing back as he kisses down her chest. Silver hair spills everywhere, sliding across all her bare skin as she moves, sinuous with her. She's breathtaking. He wants to tell her. He's sure she knows. He lost his voice with that yeah anyway. So he works to show her, best he can.

It's her that says, "So beautiful," her fingers mapping over his face, biting her lip. She's staring into his eyes, studying his features, but she skims a touch over all his ugly gnarled scars and she teases, "You know how pretty you are?"

Aye, I've heard, he tries to retort. To play. He can't find use for his tongue with anything but stroking across every bit of her body he can strain for. Hardening painfully when she shivers at the scrape of his beard across her skin.

He's tempted to bend the knee right here, as she'd first asked, to offer her everything because she hasn't asked for it since. But how can he help her hold the weight up if he becomes just another soldier, just a warden, when her impulse is still to bear it alone? He's met his match in her, he knows, he's always known. Someone as stubborn as he is. Someone as troubled. If they can figure out how to navigate all the complications and their requirements, they could be good for each other in the future. If he can learn to handle her better, react to her smarter, and if she can learn to respect him more. They could make great partners.

If they're willing to work for that. If they're willing to fight for it.

I'm still mad, he doesn't say. I don't want to be, but I am. He won't kick her when she's down so low. And his anger is nothing under the burden of his shame.

In their grief, Jon and Dany make love. Soft and slow and quiet, stormy under the surface with all the seething emotions, the distrust and hurt and resentment. The regret and longing. The fear of what's to come.
"You must love him," the girl says in the morning, appearing at the queen's side on deck without warning. "To have done that for him, saved me for him. I know it can't be repaid, but I will try."

Daenerys stays turned toward the clouds, sunshine fighting its way through them for the first time in days. The wind cutting at her face is cool but no longer to the point of pain. It leaves her braided locks rippling off her shoulder. Her fingers curve over the wood of the rail, nails biting into it until it hurts her. Grounds her. She thinks she'll leave her alone when she says nothing, but the girl remains.

"I wasn't there that day, in Braavos, the day you razed the House of Black and White to the ground. I'd already left. But I’ve heard the stories."

She should have seen it in her eyes. "You were one of them."

"I could never be one of them. For a time, I thought I could, but I was wrong. Faceless Men kill whichever name their god gives them, for whatever petty reason is given. There's no justice in that. I want justice."

For the first time since Viserion fell, the queen smiles.

"If we win this…"

"We will," she swears.

"How much have you thought of what comes after?"

"Endlessly."

"If we win this, if we come out the other side, you'll be queen of the Seven Kingdoms. And maybe the Bay of Dragons and beyond." Then he asks, "What of Jaehaerys?" He seems so burdened by that, so darkened, it moves her out of her chair at the desk where she'd been writing. "Your heir is a bastard."

"And?"

"And we know how Westeros treats bastards."

"And women, and foreigners, and eunuchs, and dwarves, andorphans, and many others," she continues, lowering tentatively to the bed by his feet. Observing the concerns as they pass across his bronze eyes where he's propped against the wall at the top. "When I am their queen, that won't matter."

"It will, Dany. It's how it's always been. People don't change. These people won't change for you."

"That doesn't mean we stop trying. Unfair as my life has been, I was born with a privilege and I will use it. My name, my bloodline, my dragons, my magic, as you call it. It's a gift that has the power to change how it's always been. If the Dornish can learn to respect the Unsullied as men, not eunuchs or slaves, and the Dothraki can learn to be protectors, not pillagers, when all they've ever known is to rape and kill as they like, then Westeros can and will come with us into a new age."

He's skeptical. "Have your Dothraki learned that?"
Daenerys flicks her gaze skyward, shoulders moving slightly, a wave of reluctant controversy shaping her face. "It's a work in progress. Most have shown very intense resistance, but some have taken to the growth surprisingly, and that gives me hope. They value strength above all else. They only need to be convinced there are better strengths than the brutal kind they've known."

"You're incredible, you know," is what he says, instead of pursuing that side of the topic. "I want you to be right. I want you to succeed. But I just … can't see it."

"Neither could I, for a long time," she admits. "It took one success, a small thing, and then another, and another, each one a little bigger, before I could even imagine the possibilities. It took the people around me surprising me, inspiring me, people like Missandei and Grey Worm, like Ornela and Kovarro. Once I could see it, once I was strong enough to put faith in my dreams, these dreams that come true, then it was easy to reach for it. To fight."

"You're the most dedicated idealist I've ever met."

"It's not idealism," she disagrees. "What I'm trying to build, it's possible. It's thrived before in history. It exists elsewhere now. To a smaller degree, yes, but it exists."

"This life you imagine—"

"A life where women are not treated as I've been treated as a woman. Where bastards are not treated as you've been treated. Where dwarves are not treated as Tyrion has been treated. Where men like Varys are not treated as they're treated for something horrific that happened to them. Where people like Missandei never know what it is to be a slave. Where orphans aren't left to fend for themselves in the streets. Where the lowborn do not starve by the hundreds while one rich man throws out enough food to feed them all. Where men are shown mercy or punished for their crimes all the same, no matter their name or wealth."

"A good dream," Jon grants, lips curved just faintly. He winces, bending to take her hand from where it's been resting tensely on his outstretched leg. He rubs his thumb at the center of her palm, calloused fingertips digging into her knuckles. "A very grand dream, Your Grace."

"It is," she murmurs, offering a fleeting but playful smile, "and my dreams are true, White Wolf."

They share a moment of something like camaraderie, eyes locked, expressions matching, before he turns solemn again. Troubled again. "But why subject Jaeh to that? Let others lead that fight, Dany."

"You think I should royally legitimize him," she acknowledges.

"The only reason not to is if you want to make him champion of that struggle. It's noble, sure, but that should be his choice."

"Perhaps," she acquiesces, still somewhat reluctant.

If her words to her people are to hold weight, she should lead them by example, but that has often been impossible with the ways she's had to wrest power away from their enemies. But this, she'd half thought this could be one. Jon speaks as his father, and she hears him as both his mother and a leader, so she finds herself split.

She'd wondered whether he was rounding this conversation towards marriage. She'd wondered, she'd wanted. But the sting of disappointment she feels pales to her relief when it doesn't come. Her rejection would've pushed him even farther away. And it would've had to have been a rejection. She has no interest in some honor bound proposal for Jaeh's benefit.
If she were to let him choose something so permanent while he's still conflicted, still feels slighted, simply because he felt beholden to, then he would grow to eventually resent her.

She has to make things right between them first. Somehow.

Daenerys aspires to reach the point that she's secure, in her heart and her head and her instinct, that he won't betray her, regardless of his feelings. The point that she's better at making all those intimate decisions she struggles with under the stress of keeping together a hastily coalesced empire and organizing a mass scale invasion. The point that he forgives her and trusts her and sees her for who she is. She wants them each to learn how to balance their feelings with the complications of what must be done. How to cope while they stand together as well as when they inevitably end up on opposing sides of a problem.

The power dynamic between them has been in flux since she returned. Causing confusion, causing uncertainty, causing contention. Wounding. In the wilderness, it had been so easy, because they had been equals. Just a man and a woman. No war or crowns or conflicting positions. No court politics to make them each falter. And now, now that everything is a mess, she's choosing to reach for him, but she's lost on just how to smooth this tumultuous evolution.

Perhaps it can't be smoothed. Perhaps it must be messy the whole way through. Perhaps they just have to weather each mistake and obstruction however they can manage to, however many stumbles, however ungracefully.

She means to bring him to the point where he's ready to be her husband. Ready to be her king. Where she is worthy to be his queen.

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When Jon comes around again, the first thing he's aware of is Dany against him, turned away from him, furs slipping to expose her bare back as she sleeps, her hands buried under her head. He runs his knuckles absently up the dip in her spine before he's really awake. The second thing he becomes aware of is Arya, sitting motionless in a chair at the bedside, staring at him. He jerks slightly in surprise. Blinks, groans, starts to prop himself up.

"Nice to see you're thawing."

He rakes a look over her. "And you?"

"Arm hurts, but it's usable." Then she softens, whispers, "You came for me."

"Of course I did."

"On the back of a dragon no less, Mister King in the North," she jokes.

"Aye, there's much to tell you about, isn't there? But first, Arya, where have you been? Why the hell were you Beyond the Wall? If you were in the North, why didn't you come to Winterfell?"

"I wanted to go home," she assures. "When I heard you and Sansa retook Winterfell, I turned from King's Landing. I intended to go home."

"What stopped you?"

"Nymeria."

For a moment, he's confused, thinking of the Sand girl, wondering what she could possibly have to
do with Arya. Then it clicks. "She's still alive?"

"She is. When I first left for King's Landing with Father, I attacked the prince and Nymeria bit him. I knew they would kill her, so I sent her away. I haven't seen her since. But I dream of her."

"Aye," he sighs, knowing what she means. The connection she feels for her wolf, like the one he has with Ghost, that Dany has with Drogon. He can imagine just how swaying those dreams could be.

"I saw her in the North, Jon. Gathering a pack. I saw her on the other side somehow. She was hunting. She's seen the Others. She jumped one. She tried to rip him apart, but the more pieces she tore, the more he moved. I didn't believe it at first. They were just dreams, after all. But then I met the Hound and the Brotherhood Without Banners on the Kingsroad and they told me what they'd seen in the flames. I'd sworn to kill them the next time I saw them, but they meant to cross the Wall and I wanted to go with them. They were sure their Lord of Light was leading them to something important."

"Why would you kill the Brotherhood Without Banners?"

Without a flicker on her face or a waver in her straightforward tone, his baby sister answers, "We crossed paths once before, years ago, and they sold someone I loved to the Red Witch for sacrifice."

"I'm sorry."

"I needed to see them for myself, and I couldn't go Beyond on my own, so the Hound convinced me to make my vengeance wait."

He turns skeptical. "The Hound convinced you?"

She shrugs. "He's someone else I have history with. We traveled the Riverlands together when I was younger, after he kidnapped me and went looking for Starks or Tullys to sell me back to. For a time, his name was on my list, but I had my chance to kill him and I chose to let him live. At that point, it would've been a mercy not to, but the choice was made."

"Seems we've both had eventful years while we were separated."

"Seems so," she agrees, a small smile at the edges of her lips.

"So they were chasing their fire god. What were you doing, Arya?"

"Hoping to find Nymeria, I think. I wanted to rescue my wolf. But I never found her. And I told myself I was doing it for you. I heard what you've done, how you were working to ready the North for this war coming to us, and I didn't want to come home to you empty-handed."

"Arya—"

"I know. Your sister safe and alive is more than enough," she says. Reads his mind. "But I needed more. I thought if I could catch one of these dead men, I might bring it back to you and smarter heads than yours or mine could experiment. The first step to fighting your enemy is understanding your enemy."

"You're talking sense," he sighs. "I still wish you hadn't gone."

"So do I," she confesses, and suddenly she's darkened and exposed with guilt and sadness. Her eyes slide past him to the sleeping queen. "She brought three dragons back into the world and I watched one fall from the sky. Because of me."
"No," he's quick to cut down. "No, that's not on you, Arya. That was him." He grabs for her hand, pulls it to him, urging her to the edge of her seat, closer. "And if you want to get into blaming, I'm the one that begged her to take them up there to get you, when I knew the dangers to them. If she'll blame anyone, it would be me."

"Will she? Blame you?" Arya wonders. "It doesn't seem like it."

She won't. He feels fairly sure of that. But he does. He wouldn't make a different decision. No matter the cost, he would never leave his kid sister to die. But that only makes it worse. He traded her child for his sister and he would do it again. The shame from that will probably always eat at him.

"Sansa will be so happy to see you."

"Will she?"

"She's grown a lot since we were all last together, you know. We all have."

"Not all for the better," she warns.

"I should've said to hell with my oath," he admits, gaze focused in grief on their joined hands. "I should've looked for you."

"You should've, prick," she jokes, a hesitant half smile softening the truth that can't be changed. The past that can't be repaired. "I missed you. I kept Needle with me. It saved my life over and over. When I looked at it, I remembered you."

"C'mere." He gives a tug on her hand. Her uncertain glance towards Dany makes him promise, "It's alright."

And Arya leaves her seat. She puts a knee to the edge but hesitates, coming with a soft sigh of surprised relief when he tugs her again, gently encouraging her down beside him on the bed. He hooks his elbow at her nape, fingers still tangled loosely, pulling her into him until she rests on his chest and he sets his chin on her head. As he would've done when she was little.

"You've a nephew, you know."

Arya picks up her head in shock. "You're lying!" And her tense mouth breaks into the beginnings of brightness. She jerks her chin at the silver hair on his other side in question and he nods, matching her grin, the girl sly as he's half sheepish, half proud. "King in the North and you've nabbed yourself a dragonrider queen." She drops her cheek back down to his shoulder, and he feels such contentment, Dany against him, his arm around Arya, like a dream. "Not bad, big brother. Not bad."

This moment feels more like home than Winterfell ever had.

It's finally setting in. When the shock starts to splinter apart and she can feel the overwhelming storm of grief wash in, Daenerys knows she's going to break apart. She can't do that here with her people and these strangers watching.

The dream is the last straw.

Ice and fire swirling together, a choking darkness, dying screams in her ears, the monster she's twice come face to face with that can't be killed, the cries of her children where she can't get to them, can't save them. Drogon, Rhaegal, Viserion, Jaehaerys. The world gone quiet after all those screams, the
fire dying, leaving silence and snow and nothing but death wherever she turns.

She leaves Jon behind in bed, despite him trying to hold onto her hand as she pulls away, and she walks wildly to the deck. Gripping the rail, struggling to hold together as her body shakes and her breath stutters jaggedly. She wrenches off her confining coat, movements clumsy, impatient.

"Dany…"

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Using the wall for leverage, Jon follows in her wake. Still exhausted and stiff and battered from his journey, he's moving too slow. He makes it onto the deck, calling for her, coming up beside Arya and Davos where they stand watching, just as she climbs suddenly onto the rail and throws herself over into the churning water. Gone before anyone can even try to reach her.

The ship panics, startled, bewildered, thinking she's killed herself.

Jon knows better, but the instinctive fear still guts him. The worry and the grief and the wish that he could help her. He should be able to fix this. But he can't even keep her from drowning. It's Drogon that swoops smoothly underwater, surging into the sky with his mother on his back.

She leaves them behind, fading into the darkness with her dragons.

Ghost howls after them.

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Drogon touches down somewhere secluded. She crashes hard to her knees and screams loud enough to crack the sky open. Birds scatter out of the trees. Drogon and Rhaegal surround her, lying to the ground, curling around her, shutting out the rest of the world. She sobs and screams and shakes for hours.

It's only when dawn comes that she realizes where she is.

The waterfall, the meadow, the cliff and its cave. She should've never left this place. Drogon was right. She should've forced Jon to stay. She should've abandoned the world. But she didn't and it's too late now. The damage is done. So she's going to burn it down. If it's the last thing she does, she's going to burn that ice king creature to ash. Gods help anyone that stands in her way.
Chapter 13

New Rules

The current carried the ship quicker northbound. Sailing south takes longer. Longer even still when the storm sweeps in after Dany's gone. They linger at its fringes, watching it roil in the distance, hoping it will pass out of their path. But it doesn't pass. It stalls, spreads wide, strengthens. It becomes so dangerous, they're forced to turn course. They anchor at Runestone, seeking refuge with House Royce.

Jon uses the time they're stranded to familiarize himself with this new person his sister has become. Her stories are … even more upsetting than Dany's. She doesn't open to him at first. It takes effort to make her comfortable, to make her trust him with her honesty, but once she starts talking, he half wishes she hadn't. The little of what she shares with him is much worse than he imagined.

Yet she stands before him seemingly whole, quite the young girl.

When they're not together, he's mitigating the suspicion and hostility from Lord Royce and his people, and she's gaining the trust of her ill tempered cousin, the Arryn boy, with tough love and a little intimidation. Lord Royce's ward at present, but the boy is heir to the Vale and he's an important ally. Jon's relieved he seems to have taken an odd liking to his sister, half fascinated, half frightened. Especially given the obvious reluctance House Royce shows to be part of the vast alliance culminating.

From the start, they expressed disdain and distrust, if not outright refusal, at the insistence to blend wildlings and Northmen and foreigners from the Targaryen banner. They did not want to accept the wildlings. They did not want to accept the Unsullied. They did not want Jon to go south to Dragonstone and reunite with Daenerys.

The only good Targaryen is a dead Targaryen, they'd said. Savages from the north, savages from the east, tromping all over our lands. You'll give the North away, they'd said.

And now, Arya comes to him and reveals, "Apparently, our discontented lords have been stewing at Winterfell. Moaning to Sansa about you and your choices. They even talked of possibly petitioning her into ruler of the North, instead of regent."

"Their king from this day to their last day indeed," Jon murmurs wryly, laying a hand to the stone over the hearth, staring into the fire.

"They're fickle and shortsighted and selfish. You don't need lords whose loyalty is so changeable. Maybe we should eliminate the loudest voices before their grumblings spread. I could take care of it."

"No, Arya," he says quick, before her ideas get any grislier. "That's not the kind of king I want to be. Even if I were forced to handle them that way, you're not my executioner. I don't need that from you."

"I can help you," she argues.

"I know. I know you can. You will be help to me. But not like that." Then he asks, "How did Sansa respond?"
"She urged them to have faith in their king and sent them packing."

"It didn't dissuade them," he guesses, and his sister nods. "We'll deal with our unhappy Houses altogether once we're at Winterfell. First, we deal with the dangers to the south."

Eastwatch sent word to Dragonstone of what they'd procured the day of the wight hunt. The queen's Hand took the initiative to arrange a parley at the capital, to enact the plan their queen had dismissed before they had their hands on the evidence they needed. News comes that Tyrion was successful while they're still stuck ashore. Word from Winterfell follows, how Sansa had sent Lady Brienne south to Jon with a party for support, how news of the impending parley changed their course just short of Dragonstone, heading instead to the capital to meet him. The queen's forces have mobilized as well.

As the storm dies, they sail past the island directly to King's Landing, past the Stormborn blockade with their friendly flag. They don't know quite what to expect of Dany, disappearing as she did, grieved as she is, the unprecedented turn of it all, but they proceed as planned for lack of else to do. The king taking command.

Familiar faces greet him on the long harrowing walk to the Dragonpit. Delegates appear from every ally Daenerys and he has gathered, their forces combined, a united front when they converge from every direction, land and sea.

The last time he saw the Lannister twins, he'd been a boy at Winterfell. The last time his family was together. The last time half the Starks were alive. Knowing what he knows now, what would happen, who would be responsible, it's harder than he thought it would be, seeing their faces when they stride into the pit, royal troops flanking them. He looks into her eyes, this lion queen, and reminds himself harshly of his purpose here. He tells himself the world doesn't need any more dead people, on the brink of war with death already. He tells himself. He tells himself. But he isn't convinced.

It's one of the hardest things he's ever had to do, stand before her in neutrality, and he didn't prepare for that.

His reaction is … visceral.

A huge wave of relief sweeps through their court when the roar in the distance turns heads. The shadow casts ominously across the sand. Dany and Drogon touch down. His own relief is deeper still, that she's here, that she's alright, letting her presence steel him as she makes her way regally to the waiting seat of honor on her side. She doesn't meet any of their worried or questioning eyes, not Tyrion's, not Jon's. She's focused on Cersei Lannister.

Tyrion begins, and when his sister dismisses his diplomatic entreating, Jon takes over, sending the Hound out for their captive. He does his best to impress upon them the dangers, the world ending imperative here. Yet all she's got to say is that it would be an improvement for most of them. The death of a million people is a joke to this woman. Her people. Her own damned people. She couldn't care less. He's trying to be a king, to be patient and cautious, to not repeat the mistakes he made with Dany on her throne, getting riled too easily. But he can't stop the disgust that blooms on his face. He steps forward, looks her up and down, beckons the Hound. And when he kicks it out, the wight makes a grave good show, lunging for her, its chain yanking.

For a moment, her disinterested mask slips and she's petrified. Then it's back in place and he feels like he's talking to a wall. He knows from start to finish that this is a useless endeavor, but he's
desperate, they are all so desperate, and then she opens a window. Briefly, just the faint flicker of hope, before the letdown comes.

The ultimatum.

"Until the dead are defeated, they are the true enemy." Her harsh speculative gaze rakes over Dany then turns to him. "So long as the King in the North remains in the North where he belongs."

Dany's face is perfect, utterly unreadable, her posture rigid with dignity. As the impact of those words hits him and the hope dies, he turns to her, beseeching behind his guarded frown. She gives him nothing, just a silent support, a tacit encouragement of whatever he chooses. He doesn't know what she wants him to do. He knows what he should do, what he must, and yet...

"I cannot give you what you ask," Jon proclaims. He's looking at Dany as he does. "I've sworn myself to Daenerys Stormborn."

The flicker of surprise breaking through her mask startles him. Love and pride and thirst in her eyes at his unequivocal loyalty. Everyone around them is clearly horrified at him ruining their one chance, wrecking this historic summit with six fatal words. But she's not. She doesn't seem upset at all, as he thought she would. She seems pleased. He just wrecked it all and she makes him feel victorious with that one look.

In that moment, Jon has a revelation.

This is what matters. That look on her face.

Cersei sours. Sneering, "Then we're done here." Rejecting their plea for armistice and alliance, she surges to her feet.

Predictably, this doesn't go as anyone planned. Least not their plans. But Dany always has her own, doesn't she?

Still locked in his stare, she calls coldly, "Lannister." Then turns to the opposing ruler only when she and her Queensguard train halt their exit. "You're not dismissed."

Unimpressed, Cersei laughs at her. "Go home, little girl."

She rises to her feet after her. She's been quiet up to this point, letting this play out, her thoughts shielded from even him. Now she makes her move. Steps out into the dirt beside Jon. Jaime's hand is on his sword hilt, the Mountain moving closer. Tension pulls taut throughout the whole gathering. "Unlike my fine King in the North," she says, "I have no compunction when necessity outweighs honor."

Realization widens the lioness's eyes. Urgent, she snarls, "Kill her!"

A dozen things happen at once. Jon's sword is drawn and in front of Dany before the order can finish. The Mountain lumbers in their direction. Jaime grabs at his sister's elbow. Their advisors jump to their feet. Dothraki swing their weapons into defensive positions. Among other things, the whole assembly jerking into panicked motion, at the edge of chaos.

The only action that makes a true difference, though, is what the Lannister queen's Hand does then. Forgotten at her side, at her back, no one pays enough attention to stop him. Dagger suddenly out of his robes, he snatches her cropped gold hair and yanks her neck back, blade slicing across her throat before she can make another sound. It happens in a heartbeat, in a blink, while all her protectors are
focused on the imposing threat Dany makes of herself. And as their heads are whipping back around, Drogon crashes to the ground behind the Lannister court, right above Cersei a split second after her throat opens. His legs land on either side of Qyburn, hovering protectively, spine arched upwards, wings spread, and they all scatter, throwing themselves out of the way of his slaughter.

Dany is perfect stillness amidst the chaos. She doesn't move as fire alights the pit, consuming the dead lion queen and the men that shield her. The Mountain tries again for Dany, and Jon plants his feet in brace, but the Hound cuts his path. Tyrion shouts in wild protest, a plea to Dany drowned out by the screams. Jaime only survives because Brienne is there to yank him from his sister's side, dragging him down into a levee before it's all awash with flame. All their allies have fallen back, watching on in shock. Dothraki swarm their khaleesi, faced outward.

Jon unhitches the cumbersome cloak from around his shoulders, lets it drop to the dirt as his blood pumps harder. Violence thrums through his body, mindless panic that someone will get to her. All he can do is keep close to her in the madness. He grabs at her with his free hand, but his eyes are on the melee.

The Hound runs through his brother, beneath the breastplate, blade angled up to do the most damage. Instead of falling, the Mountain knocks him back, draws it out, and slashes his brother diagonal across the chest with his own weapon, leaving him in the dirt. He pushes forward, met by Dothraki, crushing clumsily through them, unmoved by their strikes. Quite literally a mountain. Jon lets go of Dany's hand then to advance, knowing he can't let the thing come any closer.

He can't waste his sword on that black armor, and he can't let the Mountain land a blow on him because he'd be debilitating, so he tries to draw his focus, tries to help the Dothraki as they meet failure. He manages to catch a perfect strike when the thing turns to throw a screamer, Longclaw cutting quick between the junction of armor at his shoulder joint, and the Mountain's arm drops, bisected. But whatever it is, this thing, it's not bothered at all. It just keeps coming.

Then everything falls into place in one lucky heartbeat. The Hound rolls over in the dirt and digs his dagger into his brother's heel, cursing, "Fucking cunt." A screamer hooks his weapon around the Mountain's opposite knee. As the monster buckles, another Dothraki leaps from behind, catching the helmet that shields him, yanking it off as he goes by to get out of reach. Jon arcs Longclaw swift through his neck the next second. A deformed rotting head goes rolling and the lumbering body begins to fall forward. On the backend of his heaving spin, Jon kicks the Mountain right into the path of the dragon's fire when Drogon swings around.

He watches it burn for a moment, panting, sword slick in some thick black blood that reeks, making his eyes water. Then sense shakes through the fight instinct to him and he whirls wildly to find Dany.

They're surrounded by Lannister troops, trapped, all closing in for attack. The dragon slows them, fear forging indecision. But it won't last.

His revelation…

His revelation was that he doesn't care. He doesn't care what's demanded of him. It's not his job to handhold the northern lords or be the bigger person with Cersei Lannister or deny himself everything he feels, everything he loves, for the sake of—he doesn't even remember what anymore. It's his job to protect his family. His son, his sisters, his queen. Whatever they do, whatever any of them do, that never changes. It's his job to keep Dany alive. It's his job to make Dany happy. That seems impossible now, but it doesn't matter. He can be fuelled by spite when hope won't work. He can't go on with only the Long Night keeping him going. It was destroying his spirit from the inside out. He has to allow himself a better purpose.
She's a better purpose.

He needs to get her out of here. He needs to get her onto Drogon's back and get her up into the sky where she's safe.

Before the whole Dragonpit closes in on them.

Yet before the Lannisters can rally, archers appear from above, lining the jagged stone ruins of the Dragonpit walls. A phalanx of Unsullied flood out of every archway, in every direction, forming a shield wall, their spears out. Second Sons bleed between them before they close ranks, circling, closing in on the Lannisters. And now their enemy is surrounded as well. Now their enemy is outnumbered.

Qyburn comes to stand beside the Dragon Queen, at her other side, pulling off his face, his mask, to reveal Arya beneath. And of all the insane things he's seen over the years, impossible, stunning, this has to be the moment that disturbs him the greatest. He's left staring at his sister in a daze as she strips out of the Hand's robes.

Drogon calms, his streams of fire left licking out, but he breathes no more. The screams of the dying end. Who remains are frozen, locked in defense, not yet surrendered.

His kid sister announces, "Winter has come for House Lannister." Then, with a knowing glance at Dany, she bloody smiles. Viciously, victoriously. Finishes, "With fire and blood."

It's only because he's right against her that Jon knows Dany's worked up at all, only because he feels her breath coming quick and sharp. Her face is stone, imposing, regal, unflappable. She lifts her hand, where his fingers had twisted back into hers the second he returned, and brushes his bloodied knuckles across her lips in a fleeting reassurance. Then she lets go.

Daenerys walks through the fire to stand over Cersei's burning corpse and address the cornered soldiers, her coat aflame, leaving her like some fierce vision, wreathed in fire. Unburnt. She ascends her dragon's wing and he lifts off the ground to perch on a crumbling tower. She looks over the soldiers in the pit, and she looks out over the hills, seeing something vast.

Jon should probably be horrorstruck. By this, by this woman he just swore himself to in front of every kingdom. What she's just done, how she's done it, goes against everything he tries to stand for, and it's everything his father would've been ashamed of. But he's not, because she's fucking remarkable. There's no horror left in him. There's only awe.

And Arya… Gods, Arya? What in bloody hell?

He thought he'd gotten her opening up. She obviously left out a few details.

When she speaks, she speaks less to the soldiers than she does to whoever awaits below Rhaenys's Hill. "Your queen is dead! Your queen that stole her crown by setting wildfire to your Great Sept, destroying half your city, your own people, for her benefit. She let you burn. She let you starve. She and her family have shown you nothing but indignity and disregard. There's nothing you can do for her now. You can fight and die here today in a pointless conflict. Or you can join us. Join us in defending your lands, your homes, your families, your people. You've seen what we say is true. You know what comes from Beyond the Wall. The Long Night is here. Are we going to keep fighting each other while the dead consume us all and everything we've ever known? Or are we going to beat it back? Together. And usher in a new age. A glorious spring. Not for just your lords and ladies and kings and queens, but for us all!"
This is how Daenerys Stormborn unites the Seven Kingdoms. For however long it will last, this is it. There's still plenty of dissent that needs stomping out, greedy frightened lords and scheming ringmakers, still angry shouts or resentful whispers. *Foreign whore, foreign invader, traitor, liar, tyrant, Mad Queen, goddamned Targaryen.* And there is still much terror from the more vulnerable to soothe. But this is where it begins.

It's over all too suddenly. The city is taken before Cersei is even dead.

Victory happened while they negotiated. Drogon led Rhaegal in a hunt across King's Landing to destroy the traps Cersei had laid for them. While her dragons and her soldiers achieved their triumph for her, Daenerys sat in her chair and placated the pretender queen. She let it play out for Jon and Tyrion's sake, not quite like theater, because she *was* actually willing to offer her hand nicely, to give the pretender the benefit of the doubt. To allow her to surrender graciously. But the bottom line was they needed to eradicate any threat to distract them from the true war.

She was not going to bet on Cersei Lannister. She came south for the pretender's armies and she would not walk away without what she needed.

Arya Stark is the one to thank. Her most important player in this. Arya, wearing Qyburn's face after Daario and a few good men helped her infiltrate the city, catching the queen's Hand on his own the night before. Unbeknownst to Jon, her and Arya's quick coup. A queen's gambit, a stroke of luck.

Alongside the girl that is not a Faceless Man but seems to serve the Many-Faced God so well, she put Daario and Grey Worm in play to neutralize the perimeter forces at the city walls. Taking over swiftly with treachery and coldblooded kills, so as to avoid a real battle and the casualties that come with it, taking control before anyone realized what happened. Led by Arya's maps of the underground tunnels, and with the girl's gifted stealth work, her commanders laid in wait, then enacted the quiet infiltration while the pretender and company were isolated from the rest of the capital. They installed her soldiers behind the precautionary Lannister troops at the Dragonpit, then herded the commoners of King's Landing out to hear her rallying call.

None of this would've been accomplished without the Night Wolf.

It would've been safer for Arya's future to let the world believe Cersei's mad Hand killed her, but Arya wants them to know it was *her.* She'll wear the Queenslayer title with vindictive pride, remembering how she avenged her family.

"Dany?"

"I'm fine, Jon." She doesn't turn, but she reacts to the concern in his voice when he climbs the hill to stand beside her while they wait.

Overlooking the city, reeling at all the different developments that have yet to settle. He wants to reach for her, to touch her, comfort her, but he curls his hand at his side to stop himself. He struggles, searching for something to say, for the *right* thing to say. But there's nothing. And he's inevitably drawn back again to the thought that's run over and over in his head since Eastwatch, the thought
that's been eating at him with all the ways he can't change any of it. He's been too honest with himself lately. If he'd held onto denial, he could speak to her easier, without his secret shame getting in the way.

Knowing it's not the time, he says anyway, "I can never repay you for Arya. I'm so sorry it cost you your dragon."

"My child," she corrects, a harsh cracking in her voice that makes him flinch, regretting his mistake, regretting the weakness of trying to soften it for himself, to ease his own guilt. He knows they're her children. He knows what they mean to her. Trying to convince himself he doesn't, that he doesn't understand the depth of what happened, is being selfish.

The way he feels for Ghost is deep and true, but it does not compare to what Jaeh is worth to him. Ghost is so intrinsically a part of himself. If he died, it would be as if half of Jon died. Still, he would give up Ghost for Arya's life, as he would give his own life for her or Sansa or Dany. But he would never endanger his child for anyone, not even his kid sister. He'd thought… He'd wanted to believe that it was the same for Dany. Because that would make it less awful. That would make her hurt a less devastating thing. But he knows he's wrong.

Her dragons come second to her actual child, but only just second.

"If I could spare him for you," he says, but then stops, because protest flickers across her face and she almost loses her carefully constructed composure. He doesn't want to make it worse for her. He just doesn't know how to help her.

"I seem to have the habit of sacrificing my children for greater things. Rhaego for my dragons, Viserion for your sister."

It guts him, hearing her say it like that, hearing that shameful thought out loud. He'd never let Arya die if he could help it, but that it wounded Dany so badly… "We keep having to make the worst choices in the worst situations, don't we? One after another. I fear it will only get harder from here."

Dany finally looks to him, bright eyes shiny as her love and pain pour out of them. She offers him a smile with great effort. Ventures carefully through her next words. "For a long time, I would've traded them back for my baby. I would've given up the dragons to save Rhaego. But then so many wonderful things came of them. It wasn't just about my love. Their existence has wrought destruction, yes, but it's led to great changes. So many lives affected for the better. Rhaego didn't live, but so many others have for his sacrifice. And now, over time, I've come to acceptance. It may have been different if I'd ever been able to hold him, but I did not. So it makes me a monster, but I wouldn't change his sacrifice."

"It doesn't make you a monster. It makes you strong."

"I think I will come to feel the same about Viserion," she admits, chin lifting as she summons that strength and calm and resilience. "He was lost to save Arya and the Brotherhood, but so much more has come of it. We've taken King's Landing with a full force of Westeros with us and may look to the northern war sooner? His sacrifice was not in vain and I must remember that."

Voice rough and low in his throat with emotion, Jon acknowledges, "It's not fair. It's not right. I'm so sorry."

After a frozen moment, Dany breathes out all the shakiness she'd trapped in and turns into him, uncaring of the eyes that still watch them from all around. She pushes her body slowly into his, drops
her forehead onto his chest, hiding her face, resting. Feeling. He wraps his arms around her in a profound hug.

*It's gonna be alright*, he wants to promise. Considers whispering it in her ear among so many things. *Whatever happens, whatever I have to do to make it happen, this will all get better for us. For you. I won't let them hurt you any worse. I'll take you home to Winterfell where nothing can get to you. I'll give you a home, whatever I have to do. I'll give you a family.*

They don't part until Grey Worm approaches. Face blank, bloodied, soot covered, he tells his queen, "The Red Keep has surrendered."

And she stands tall again.

+ 

In the storied throne room of the Red Keep, her ancestral seat of power, Daenerys stands staring up at the dais from the center of the stone floor. The fabled Iron Throne awaits her. But she stands still in the center of a grand empty room, staring. Jon eventually seeks her out. When he comes up behind her in silence, she sighs, says softly, thoughtfully, "It's quite ugly."

He huffs a wry laugh, a release of tension. "Good. I thought it was just me."

"For something so legendary, I expected this to be momentous. Truth is, it's just as disappointing as first landing on Dragonstone had been. All I feel here is empty."

"Because it doesn't matter. What it stands for, what it leads to, aye, that's important. But this?"

"Yes," she agrees. He doesn't need to elaborate. They both know it. She turns to him without meeting his gaze, braced for his inevitable disapproval in the aftermath. Beginning in a rush of breath, "I know you must be unhappy. I would like to say I'm sorry, that I should've told you what we'd planned, but it would be dishonest. After your choice in the Dragonpit, as much as I appreciate it, can you honestly say I was wrong to let you believe you were here in good faith? I didn't like having to leave you in the dark, and I'm certain I won't have to do that again now this is done, but it was partly for your sake. I made sure you wouldn't have to lie. You wouldn't have to dishonor yourself. Because you didn't know, you have nothing to be ashamed of."

"For future reference," he replies, commands, "Don't shield me that way. Don't worry about my honor. It's not your job to protect me."

"I'll never be able to not try to protect you," she admits. "But I would prefer to be together in our decisions moving forward. Now that my own war is finished and our war is beginning in earnest."

"As would I."

Then she says, as she's been considering, debating, "The legitimization. If that's what you think is best for him, then that's what we'll do."

Jon blinks, surprised, curious. "What changed your mind?"

"You're the one that has grown up here as a bastard. It's not my experience. You're the one that should make that decision."

"Thank you, Dany."

And the look in his eyes threatens to derail her, so she clears her throat and turns her head away,
trying to concentrate. "They're gathering the lords. I'll need to sort them out before we can proceed."

"How do you plan to do that?"

"Don't look at me that way," she preempts with a sigh, so quick to feel defensive, resigned. "I don't ever intend massacres. I always give a choice."

"Daenerys..."

"You think I'm ruthless? Yes, I'm that. But if you think I'm the same as those that came before me, I'm not." Then she says, looking up at the unsightly throne again and all the misery it represents now, "When you grow up amidst poverty, you see the world the way it really is. If you don't, you'll never understand. If you don't, you're privileged to not feel what matters, to not know how important the chasm between castes is."

She's practiced this argument in her mind for a long time before finally settling on the words she felt satisfied with. So many times, she's held her tongue as her advisors guided her away from her instinct. But Jon is different. She needs him to understand. To agree on this.

"You think rich men that have no worries while they destroy thousands of lives, cause vast misery with a careless word, deserve consideration and leniency, because of course their suffering is worth sympathy to you. But what of their victims? By asking to show them mercy, you're confirming what the world has demonstrated, that their victims are less, that justice for them means less."

"Dany," he cuts in, stronger this time, leaving behind his patience and hesitancy. "Look at me." And she turns. She raises her eyes. She fixing on his face. "You're having a conversation with someone else, not me, not here. You're seeing what you expect to see right now, not what's there." He pushes out a harsh breath, conflicted as his feet move him towards her. "I'm sorry if I've made you expect that. I've been a fool—"

"We've both been foolish," she concedes.

"Aye, we have." He pauses, searches over her, and wearily says, "We should both probably try to have more sympathy for ourselves. And each other."

"We should," she murmurs with a small wry smile.

*I wish we could go back,* she thinks, wistful. *I wish we could start again.*

It's not easy for her, but she tries to meet him halfway. "You're right. Those words weren't for you. I need to remind myself of why I do what I do, especially when it leads me to put myself at odds with the people I love and listen to. And I do listen to them. Even if it seems I don't, I do, Jon. I hear them. And I hear you. It takes a lot for me to hold to what I believe I must do when people I admire tell me something else. I don't enjoy how that affects those people."

"I understand. Sansa tried many times to advise me. She tried so hard to make me listen to her. I respect my sister, I love her, and yet I still ignored her almost always. Because I felt I knew what was right and I didn't have patience for considering any alternatives she wanted to present. I was not kind or diplomatic about it. I've been reminded of those times recently, seeing it from the other side, and wishing I'd handled it better. Just as I think I could've minimized the repercussions of bringing the wildlings through the Wall if I'd done a better job of addressing everything with my brothers. I keep making the same mistakes, Dany."

"We both do, it appears."
"Maybe we have a lot to learn about ruling."

"It sounds like diplomacy is our biggest weakness," she teases, a half smile pulling at her lips. Then turns curious. "With your sister, was it that you didn't agree with what she was offering or was it that you just couldn't hear her?"

He exhales at the question, shoulders dropping slightly, pulled to reconsideration. After a moment, he answers, "I thought I trusted her. I do trust her. But maybe it's not that simple. Maybe I do but I don't."

"Why do you say that?"

"The Battle for Winterfell was basically a massacre. That was my mistake. But it was a mistake I wouldn't have made if she'd been honest with me. If she'd told me there was a chance she could sway the Vale to fight with us, I wouldn't have led those men to their deaths. I think I've been wary of her for that."

"I'm sorry," Daenerys murmurs, drawing his eyes back to her. She means those words for a lot of different reasons. A layered thing, a complex thing.

"I'm not unhappy with you," he says, gentler, genuine, bringing them back onto focus. She goes silent. "Maybe a few months ago, I would've felt betrayed. But that would've been instinctive, not logical. I do appreciate what you were trying to do for me. It needed to be done either way. You and Arya and your commanders got it done. That's all that matters now. There's no time to look back. Arguing about your strategy won't help anything."

"It was Arya's plan, you know. Your sister is … an impressive girl."

"That she is." Then graver, "In the future, if there is a future, the methods we take to achieve what we need to will demand deeper scrutiny. But for now…"

"For now," she assents.

"I do wish I could've been more help to you in this. I don't have it in me anymore to be underhanded. My time with the wildlings, what I did, what it led to, all the killings, so many massacres, Dany… It burned all that out of me."

"Which is why I'll never require it of you."

"You know," he begins slowly, thoughtfully, "I get it now. All the things you always talk about. I had such a hard time believing, but I don't anymore. Hearing stories about what you've done and seeing how you do it are very different experiences. You have a way of making impossible things happen."

"Not alone. I haven't accomplished any of this alone. We've all succeeded so far because we've worked together. My small khalasar that kept me alive for so long while my dragons were still growing. The Unsullied and the freedmen that chose to follow me and fight for me and fight for themselves and take their own freedom. The knights and the mercenaries that decided to help me achieve what I needed. The lion man that pulled himself out of the gutter and put his hope in me. The priests that laid prophecy at my feet. The Dothraki that chose me to lead them when I burned their temple and showed them true strength. The Ironmen and Dornishmen and Reachers that put aside their differences to join us. Then she angles back towards him from where she'd wandered in her musing and gives him a lilted look. "The Lord Commander that chose to be fearless and to take me off the back of a dragon and save my life and keep me alive for so long in the wilderness."
"We kept each other alive."

"Yes, we did." Then she says, "You know, you've brought about impossible things as well. Things the world around you tried to convince you was a waste, that you couldn't do. And you accomplished them because you're stubborn and brave and much bolder than you think you are. Because you didn't listen."

"Aye, but maybe I need to start listening a little more."

"You're doing fine," she declares, her smile blooming stronger, warmer, surer. "I understand the doubt. It's hard to have faith when all you've known is the world beating you down."

Jon just sighs. After a moment of getting distracted in each other's stare, he rotates, taking in their opulent surroundings, obviously feeling surreal and out of place. "What now?"

"Now we take our combined forces, the might of all of Westeros and Essos," she declares, "and we go north."

He looks back to her, expression slacking with something like surprise or wonder. "What?" he rasps.

She offers another half smile, sad but humorous. "You didn't think I would keep to my word." No one in the world will after this, King's Landing and Slaver's Bay more than enough precedent to ensure no adversary will take her at her word or trust her treaty. But she realized that before she made the choice. She weighed the cost against the necessity and she must be willing to weather the consequences.

Jon slices his head sharply to one side to dismiss the assertion. "Just relieved the day's finally come is all."

"We'll call the banners together quickly as possible, but it may take time for every House and its army to fall in line." She begins measuring the length of the cavernous gold room, her body mapping its edges as she voices her intentions. "It's more likely bringing my mercenaries face to face with the dead will convince them there's no price worth it, so I'll leave the Second Sons here to bring order to the capital. They're better suited to this kind of work. I'd rather not leave behind any of my Unsullied. They'll be more valuable in the fight to come. Loyal, disciplined, persistent. They are fearless and unselfish."

"You're going to trust Daario with the capital?" he asks, highly skeptical, swiveling in his spot to keep his eyes on her.

Daenerys laughs. "Trust him with it? No. Daario and his Second Sons are good for force. They make things happen, very well. But he is no politician. I will not leave him to fend off all the panicked or opportunistic lords that will come calling in our wake. No, that will be for Tyrion and the council he'll need to assemble here."

"Don't you want to keep the Hand of the Queen close?"

"Battle is not my Hand's forte," she retorts with an easy shrug. From here on out, she has no interest in playing politics, so she'll have no need for her Hand at her side. She needs soldiers, warriors, battle commanders, scouts, spies. Tyrion would be wasted in the North. "Like my mercenaries, he's best utilized here, albeit for different reasons. If anyone can smooth the capital through its transition, it will be him."

"And if too many Houses rebel? Will you turn back?"
"There's no turning back now, Jon," she promises, meeting his dark worried eyes with a warm smile. Wanting to get lost in them. "The Houses can do as they like while we're north. We will be taking their armies."

"One war won, time to look to the next," he murmurs, burdened down under his weariness. It draws her around, gravitating back to him. They stand face to face in the center of the historic hall, stuck in each other's eyes. He starts to reach for her. "Dany…"

Footfalls drive them apart. Tyrion stands at the entrance, watching them soberly, darkly. He's not dumb enough to go around blatantly grief stricken, but she knows he's angry with her, betrayed by her, his sister murdered and his brother disappeared in the chaos of the aftermath.

"They are right behind me," he warns, and the murmuring voices in the corridors confirm this.

Reconstructing the queen, she goes cool and implacable, chin high, face stone. Hands clasped in front of her, she ascends the dais, spins, and sits. Says, "Bring them in." And as Tyrion goes out, Jon shuffles back, starting for the sidelines, stopped by the hike of her eyebrow. The quick tilt of her head that beckons him upwards.

When the Westeros lords enter, she's claimed the garish Iron Throne as if it were forged for her, the King in the North beside her, level with her. This all will require theater, she understands, and shoves aside the brewing storm of unsettled emotion inside her. Ignores the distaste for this farce.

A hollow throne. A hollow crown.
Chapter 14

We Break Down, We Build Again

The first chance he gets, Jon goes looking for Arya. With some help, he finds her in the Tower of the Hand. She's sitting on the floor in the middle of a lavish bedchamber, legs folded, hands on her knees, eyes closed, face blank. She's never looked so out of place. He hesitates in the doorway at the sight of her, but ultimately pushes forward, taking a chair on his way by and dropping it near her spot. He takes a seat and leans forward, rests his arms on his knees, watching her.

"This was my room," she says after awhile, then opens her eyes. "I hated it then. I hate it now. If Father had listened to me, we would've never come here. If he had listened to my warning, we would've left before it was too late."

"You got him justice today," is all Jon can find to say. There are no words that will change what happened, what went wrong, or help the scars it embedded in them. "You got them all justice."

"I was there, Jon. When they dragged him out at the square and pushed him to his knees and forced him to call himself a traitor. Then they took his head." She coils into herself, feet under her, rising with feline grace. She starts to turn, but he catches her hand at her side, stilling her. She looks down at him. "I didn't see it, that last moment. The man that helped me, he turned my face. I heard the people laughing and jeering and I heard the blade cut through him. I imagine I might've heard his head fall. But all I saw were the black birds that scattered in the sky."

He's searching her for something of the girl she was at Winterfell. He's searching for the Arya he knew. But she's not there. "He would be proud of you."

"He would be horrified," she corrects. "What I've done. What I am now. He would not recognize me."

Her hand pulls at his, trying to separate, trying to leave. Jon holds to it, gets to his feet to close the distance, wraps his arm around her. Hugs her tight and fervent until her stiff body loosens and she melts into him. His heart hurts that she thinks that, and that he secretly wonders if it could be true, if Father would recognize any of them. If he would feel shame for all what's left of his children.

Of Jon, he's almost certain of it. His actions, his failings, his broken oaths. But Arya, he has to believe the Gods would be gracious for.

"Our father was not so unbending, I think," he murmurs thickly against her hair. He hopes. He wants to believe. "If he knew, if he really knew, he'd be proud."

+ "If your dreams are right," he asks his sister, "how did Nymeria get on the other side of the Wall?"

"I don't know. It was hard enough for us."

"What do you mean?"

With the ghost of a grin, she explains, "Your wildling Night's Watch didn't want to let us through. Those iron footed Brotherhood got caught. I had to break them out of an Eastwatch cell. Then your
friend Tormund and a ranging party came after us. Said he couldn't let King Crow's sister die out there."

And so, the next raven that goes out is to Castle Black. He orders scouts to patrol between every Night's Watch fort, scouring until the entire length of the Wall has been searched for vulnerabilities. If a direwolf can get through, what else can?

"Tristan Rivers," she greets, watching Dothraki lead him in.

He approaches the Iron Throne in slow uncomfortable steps, seeming in disbelief at where he's found himself, at seeing her seated there. When he reaches the dais, he glances to each side, to the men lining the hall, and he lowers to one knee, head down, hand on his sword hilt.

The sellsword has been roaming freely around Dragonstone for awhile now, watching her wage her campaign against Cersei, making himself useful in small things. He's shown little resistance to serving her since she brought him ashore in Westeros. He could be playing a long game, but she's ready to run the risk.

"There is a quartet of merchant ships leaving for Pentos soon. You will board one. Go back to your Golden Company. Convince them to fight for us. Tell them they will be welcomed home if they do, no more exiles or bastards or sellswords. They will be equal to anyone else."

"Yes, Your Grace."

He's lying in the dark, feeling restless, when the door eases open, a sliver of torchlight from the corridor casting shadows. He swings to his feet but doesn't reach for his weapon, going still at her silhouette. Dany leans back, pressing into the door to shut it as he moves closer, padding barefoot across stone. Their eyes meet for a moment before she drops her chin, looking down. The unguarded awkwardness on her face makes him want to reach for her.

Like this, she's not queen or conqueror. She's just a young woman feeling uneasy, unsure of where she stands. She says, "I'm sorry. I shouldn't be here."

"You should," comes out of his mouth quick, instinctive, before he can choose it. Clearing his throat, he clarifies, "If you want to be here, you should."

On an expressive exhale, "I can't sleep." When he steps back, angling his body to the side to invite her inward, she leaves the door behind and turns around the darkness in emphasis. "This place was built by my ancestors. It's where House Targaryen has always belonged. But I feel … wrong here."

"Aye. I feel it too." Then he laughs, quiet and humorless. "Though that's probably got to do with the fact my family was destroyed in this place."

Dany looks back to him, going still again. "I'm sorry I made you come here."

"You didn't. You've never made me do anything." His feet take him forward despite himself, drawn by her earnestness. "All you've ever done is try to help me."

"I wish that were true," she whispers, a rueful smile curving at her lips for just a second before it's gone. They've ended up standing face to face, close enough, too close. He's debating himself over touching her, over how to go about it, when she turns. The moment passes.
He watches her drift through the room, hesitating when she considers the bed, ultimately rounding the long table and taking a seat at the far end. Under moonlight shining through panes of the veranda doors, she seems ethereal and otherworldly in the way she always does, the way she masks with her livening fire and all her unexpectedly earthy habits. She looks untouchable, like she belongs in the sky, and then she'll be found sprawled on a dirty floor, coat carelessly undone, laughing among children and wolves and commoners. She's most at home in green grass and gold sun.

The honest emotion in the air she's brought with her pulls him past the remnants of his reserve. He tells her bluntly, "You do realize none of this would've been so hard to fumble our way through if we didn't feel the way we feel about each other."

It's not until she raises her eyes to meet his again, searching his, taking a bolstering breath, nodding once in concession, that he unfreezes from where he'd gotten stuck in the middle of the floor. Watching her, waiting on her. He's got to stop waiting on her, because they're waiting on each other and it's not working. They have to try something different. But he doesn't know what. He doesn't know how.

Change comes slowly, with difficulty and backslides.

Jon passes around her to unlock the veranda doors, propping them open, letting the night breeze in to brush over her. Then he takes a chair across the corner from her. Reassures, "We won't have to be here that long, right? You'll be back on Dragonstone soon. And then…"

"And then?"

"And then I'll take you home to Winterfell."

Something powerful crosses her face at those words, but it fades and she forces herself solemn again. "I hope your homecoming will be all that you want, Jon, but I'm afraid it won't be any more welcoming for me than King's Landing."

"Northerners don't like you, it's true. But they don't know you. And Winterfell… Winterfell is my home. Most my life, it felt unwelcoming to me, but it's home nonetheless. My home will welcome you," he swears. Fears differently, but has to believe it, needs it to be true. My home is your home, he thinks, whatever comes.

"The day you brought me my armor," she says suddenly, out of nowhere, and he pulls back behind his caution until he can catch up. "I'm not sure what it was or why, but that was the day I found the bravery I needed to bring Jaeh to you. Before the ironborn attack, before you saw him, I'd decided to tell you then."

"We don't have to keep talking about this."

"I know, I know you don't like me reminding you, but I'd like to tell you a story."

He slouches in his chair, feeling tense, growing wary. "Alright."

"When I was in the Dothraki Sea, there was a woman. I loved her. Doreah had been a bedslave from a Lysene pleasure house. She was a wedding gift. My handmaiden. My slave. I had no power to change that then, so I didn't think about it. I was a foolish girl and I thought of her as my friend. She's the one that taught me how to seduce my khal. If it wasn't for her… Well, I owed her everything, in a way."

"But she wasn't your friend," he guesses.
"That's the thing. She was." He doesn't expect the shine in her eyes, the raw pain rising up as she speaks so carefully. "One night, when my brother was drunk and furious that he hadn't gotten what he sold me for, he put a blade to my stomach and said he would cut my son out of me and sell me again. Doreah, she tried to put herself in front of me. She risked herself to protect me. I didn't let her. I held her behind me. Because even with my unborn in danger, it was my job to protect her. That's what queens are for, to protect people. She was mine."

"Dany…"

Her voice thickens. "She was willing to die for me, Jon. She followed me through the Red Waste. I had no reason to doubt her. I had no reason not to love her. She was my first real friend. Then a rich man in Qarth offered her comfort and luxury. Everything we'd been through, all our loyalty meant nothing. She betrayed me. She killed another girl I loved, strangled Irri and left her on the floor like garbage. She stole my dragons. She took them away from me. I thought—" She stops. Focuses on her hands when she sets them on the table and stretches her clenched fingers straight. "That was the worst betrayal there's ever been to me. To take my children. She risked her life for me and then suddenly she would've left me for dead. I still wonder what I did to make her lose faith in me. To turn her against me."

"Wealth is a powerful motivator," he says. "I doubt it was anything you did that changed her." And in the silence that follows, he tries to resist. But he has to know. He can't help asking, "What did I do to remind you of that? Was it just refusing to bend the knee? My judgment of your methods?"

"It wasn't you, Jon." Tiredly, she turns her face away, swipes the dampness under her eye. "I never lied, not when I said I trusted you to never betray me, not when I said I knew what you were made of. It was myself I didn't trust. What I felt, what I knew, what I was so certain of. That was the barrier. Many people I cared about have betrayed me. People I was convinced I could trust. People I believed with all my heart that I knew. I've been wrong about so many of them. Wrong about so much."

"I understand."

"Like the man I thought of as a father, who turned out to be the same as the rest. All the time I'd spent suffering, thinking he was the only honorable man I'd ever known, that I could turn to and be safe with. All the time he was seeing me just as the other men did. Reducing me down to my body like the rest, when I was a child, when I was a slave. Wanting me in a way I could never want him."

The more he learns of her life before he knew her, the harder it becomes for him to reconcile it all. For him to hold down his anger. It's a pointless thing, wanting to kill dead men, dead and buried and gone. Men like her brother and her husband. But the more he learns, the more convinced he is of what's important. To find a way through all this, to come out the other side with her, to give her a home and a family and peace and safety. For himself, for his sisters, aye, but for Dany too.

So much for Dany.

Jon may have felt ashamed of his roots and known cruelty from Lady Catelyn, but he had a father that loved him, siblings, a home. He can't imagine ever being treated by Robb the way her brother treated her. The way her husband did. To live your whole life never knowing anything of decent people, never seeing men act with honor or ladies with loyalty or morals raised in a place where knights and lords were expected to protect them from the harsher things.

No wonder she's so determined to build a better world. To scorch earth. All she's ever seen of it is the worst ugliness it has to offer.
"That was his first betrayal, though he didn't see it that way. I felt violated and disillusioned but he saw it as love. Still, I forgave him. He didn't ask for it, but I gave it to him. And then, after he'd proved himself over the years as a loyal protector, whatever his desires, it was revealed to me that he'd been a traitor from the beginning. Sent by the usurper that'd been taking everything from me since the day I was born, spying on me, giving them the information they needed to try to finally kill me. He had excuses and promises and declarations of love. He broke my heart. He broke my certainty. Still, in time, I forgave him for even that. I convinced myself again, after the last time I was wrong, and the time before that, I convinced myself I knew what kind of man he was. Perhaps if he'd had more years, he'd have disappointed me again, or he'd have lived up to himself. But he didn't have years."

Jon sits forward, hands sliding across the oak surface, clasping hard at her restless fingers to make her look up at him. He doesn't have anything to say, he just … lets her see everything in his eyes.

"When he died in an attempt on my life," she tells him, "I unleashed destruction in a way I'd promised myself I never would. That's what you were worried about, Jon. That's what led to the Dragon Wrath of Braavos."

"You said yourself you didn't destroy cities. You met an enemy army in battle."

"But first I sent a message to the financers. I may not have destroyed the cities, but I sacked them. I knocked down walls and emptied banks. My goals weren't mad, my campaign wasn't out of the ordinary in itself, but I was clouded in my vengeance enough to not care about the collateral damage. I'd promised myself I wouldn't lose sight of that."

"Good," he gives her gruffly, tugging at her hands. "It's a good thing to keep in mind. It's what makes you who you are. They judge you harsher because there's never been anyone like you. Because you're a woman. But also because you hold yourself to a higher standard and that lets them get farther with their condemnation than they would if it were someone else. You rise above that. It's part of what makes you so powerful."

"And your judgment?" she wonders.

His grip on her loosens. He glances away with regret. "What about it?"

Dany surprises him by smiling, a wry humor lilting in her tone. "It may not have been enjoyable, but I'm glad you were resistant to what you were hearing. That you always questioned me. I encourage you to stay true to yourself and confront me with your doubts when you have them."

"Why? So you can keep telling me I'm wrong?" he jokes.

"It makes me reevaluate. If I come to the same conclusion, all the better. If I see it from an outside perspective and I'm troubled by it, then I deserved to be doubted. Because you're right. I'm dangerous. Sometimes, I forget how much."

"We're people," he says, "with all our flaws and scars influencing our choices."

"Yes."

"That said, I don't imagine there's anyone better to hold that kind of power."

"I hope so," she confesses, whispering it. Then she focuses, strengthens, telling him, "There've been a lot of people that thought to use my dragons against me. Doreah came the closest. And then there's you."
"I would never—"

"I know. But Drogon, the way he reacts to you, he's never done those things with anyone else. When you told me what happened in the Riverlands, all that doubt and fear rose up. I'd spent so many years worried about losing control of them, losing their love and loyalty, and then Drogon was coming to you, fighting for you, and I had no idea. It terrified me. I'm glad he brought me to you. I'm glad he saved you that night. I'm so glad he came back for you when you needed him. But what if I was wrong about you? It'd happened so many times and it'd never been so dangerous a possibility before. No one else ever had a chance of turning my children from me."

"Neither did I, Dany. You're their mother. They'll never abandon you."

"But what if? What if I was wrong? What if you could?"

He understands the irrational panic, the suspicion that came of that. He doesn't hold it against her. If there was even the slightest possibility of any of that, after all she'd already weathered, it's a harrowing prospect. But it is irrational.

No one commands Drogon but his mother. Though like she says, he is not a slave. He is a free intelligent creature and he makes his own choices. For whatever reason, whatever magic, he felt a kinship with Jon of their dragon blood and he chose to make him part of their family. Their pack. As Dany has put it, he did for her what she didn't yet know needed doing.

The questions he'd mostly buried over the years about his mother have never been harder to forget since Dany explained that to him, her belief that he's blood of the dragon somehow, that he has Targaryen in his line somewhere. He knows it couldn't have come from his father. Maybe it would've made the pain of that old wound worse, the fact that secret died with Ned Stark, but he mourned for that missing piece years ago and he's got too much reason to look ahead now.

And he has no illusions about the dragons.

When Drogon obeyed Jon's command Beyond the Wall, it was because that was what he knew he needed to do. To fly, to save himself, to save his mother.

Jon's relieved in that. He wouldn't want to hold that kind of power in his hands, to have sway over beasts like that, to be tempted to wield them. It's too much weight just bearing the fate of armies of men. He wouldn't want that responsibility. He doesn't have anywhere near as much faith in himself as she has.

"It was the insecurity in myself," she says, echoing his thoughts, "and my poor judgment in those closest to me that paralyzed me, not anything you did."

He pulls back again, fingers slowly withdrawing from hers, sliding across the table, farther and farther away. With a heavy sigh, he says, "You don't have to do this. If you keep apologizing, we're never gonna move past it. You don't have to keep dragging all these parts of yourself out for my inspection."

"Is that what it feels like? I'm conjuring more excuses?"

"No. I know what you're doing. But you don't owe me that. You don't have to keep dragging all these parts of yourself out for my inspection." When he says it, the hurt and shyness that flickers in her eyes makes him realize how it sounds. He heaves another sigh, frustrated with himself. "Don't get me wrong. I wanna know. I wanna hear it if you wanna tell me. But not out of guilt. Don't dig all your scars up for my sake."

He'd rather earn these stories.
"It doesn't."

"I've spent my life pushing forward, either remaining oblivious in order to survive or refusing to look back because I knew I wasn't strong enough. Everything I experienced, every new wound or complication got locked away, so there was so much I hadn't realized was still driving me, because I refused to look at it. With you, this is the first time I've been able to let it all soak in and reexamine what it actually did to me. There was so much about myself I didn't understand and I hadn't been aware of it. Meeting you, bringing Jaeh into the world, and all that's led to, it's changed me. Now I search and I wonder and I find that there's no single answer to the reasons of why I do what I do or feel how I feel or come to the choices I come to. Once I see it, and understand, I can fight free of it. Shackles I hadn't known were chaining me."

"You've done the same for me," he acknowledges. He doesn't know why. Whether they were just what each other needed, or they were meant to meet and had spent all these years waiting on each other, or it was simply the inevitable evolution that comes from two vastly different worlds colliding. Different, foreign, but familiar. Mirroring in a way reflections are always so similar yet still not exact.

"Perhaps it's fortunate we found ourselves tangled in these problems so early on. It's given us the opportunity to get to know ourselves and each other better, to find sturdier ground before we walk into the most important war there's ever been."

"Maybe."

"I just wanted you to know," she continues, softer, vulnerable, lashes hooding. "I wasn't forced to tell you the truth. I was relieved. And regretful that it'd taken me too long. I wanted you to know you did nothing to truly earn that distrust. In case I hadn't made it clear. My fondness has blinded me too many times."

"I understand," he says again. He already knew, if not the extent then the abstract of her reactions. He already knew those conflicts on Dragonstone were easy things they would've worked out between themselves if they weren't both so bogged down by their pasts. Wryly, "More than you might see. You know, everything I try to accomplish, I make a mess of."

"You've done fine," she disputes, lips curving.

"By luck and a lot of loss," he qualifies.

"I understand," she echoes, and their eyes lock again. When he reaches out and reclams her hand, she turns reluctant. Dutiful. "I should get back to my rooms."

"Or you should stay." His thumb strokes at the line in her palm. Awkward but steadfast, he asks her, "Do you wanna stay?"

And Dany answers, "I want to stay."

It's very loud in the capital. In the North, at the Wall, on Dragonstone, he's used to a lasting quiet. Vast land and slow paced lives and the muffling quality to snow and wind and the roar of the sea. In the morning light, everything is golden and warm. Packed with pointless riches, the room shimmers at the touch of sun streaming in the veranda doors he'd forgotten to shut last night. That's where all the noise comes from, drifting up from the streets far below, people bustling, shouting, clattering. He's never been in a real city before. It's jarring to wake up to.
When he opens his eyes, it's to something else jarring. Dany is curled on her side, hand beneath her cheek, staring at him. Searching over the shapes of his face for some strange reason. It leaves him self-conscious. He pushes up to prop against the ornate headboard, sheets sliding away. He doesn't bother with them, because they never did undress. They just laid in the darkness until they could both sleep.

"We'll be in serious trouble if Grey Worm finds out there are no guards posted on that veranda," she warns him.

Jon frowns. "It's a long climb up. But still, I should've locked the doors."

"Drogon is on the roof," she dismisses, rolling away to the edge to put her feet to the floor. "Terrifying a million people, I'm sure. I've tried to send him back to Dragonstone, but he'd prefer to keep close for now. And besides, I trust you would've saved me from any ambitious assassins."

"It was stupid," he chides himself, ignoring her subtle playfulness.

"I should get back to my rooms. Wash, dress, start the day. It's a busy one."

"More ramming heads with the lords?"

"The lords can wait. I'm sick of them and they're not what's important. Today, I want to take my time and see the city. I need to find out with my own eyes what this capital is really like. I need to assuage the panic that comes from the unknown. I can't sail away and leave them all still in fear of me, thinking their city could be razed any moment on a whim by the monster they've heard about."

"It won't be that easy to erase Cersei's fearmongering."

"I have to try," she says, rounding the bed to pick up the coat she'd worn over her flowing sheer nightgown to cross the keep. She pulls it on and fastens it, asking, "Would you like to come with me?"

"Sure."

No. Really no. He has zero interest in exploring this city. It seems miserable. He gets Arya's aversion to it, this place their father died and Sansa suffered, this place that tore the Stark family apart the day the king summoned Lord Eddard south. But this is what she does, he's heard. Takes something foul and rotten and works to brighten it back to health when anyone else would've abandoned the cause as hopeless. And yes, he would like to see a little of that.

Dany's at the door when she hesitates, angling back to him. "I'd planned to have Daario with me. He's better than my Unsullied or Dothraki at blending in. I don't want to add to people's off-putting. If you two can't get along, it could be a problem."

Jon grins. "I can endure his company. You have my word."

"Good. I'd really rather you not let him upset you. You can't take him too seriously, is the thing."

"Aye, I've noticed," he replies, but he thinks she's wrong. That sellsword is more serious about what he says than she realizes. Still, she's right that he mustn't let him bother him anymore. "I just don't see what you ever saw in him."

"I liked his loyalty to me," she admits, musing casually, "and his confidence."

"It's called cockiness," he disagrees, "and it's irritating."
"I liked it," she drawls, leaving the door behind to prowl slowly back toward him. She ends up standing at the foot of the bed. "His comrades insulted and demeaned me and caused problems. He wrested command of the Second Sons for my sake. He took their heads and laid them at my feet, then he took to his knee and swore himself to me, declaring unashamedly that the only reason he was doing so was because he wanted me. That was quite a seduction. One I didn't fall prey to for quite some time. But he kept serving me, encouraging me, killing the men that stood against me, taking my rejections with endless good cheer."

"Sounds ideal," Jon drawls back at her, not bitter or all the way jealous, but not enjoying hearing it either. It sounds like Daario Naharis was everything to her that Jon wishes he could've been from the start, if he hadn't been Lord Commander of the Night's Watch or King in the North or dedicated against the Long Night. If he'd had nothing else at stake.

"And I was lonely," she confesses then. "He was the first man since my khal I let touch me. The only man until you."

"As there was only one woman I'd ever been with before you," he finds himself saying, distracted by the look in her bright eyes, the way the sun warms her silver waves gold where they splay messily down her chest. "I loved Ygritte, I truly did. A small part of me still does, I think, a part that lives in the past with the boy I used to be. But if she were here, she'd be a hellavu lot worse to you than Daario has been to me. So I suppose, all things considered…"

Dany is smiling just slightly, mischief in her eyes. "I thought you said she promised to do unspeakable things to you if you were ever with another woman."

"Aye." He grimaces, feeling her light laughter in his chest as his own. "It would've gotten painful and messy for us both, I fear."

"With Daario," she begins again, still light, "I don't completely trust that he won't desert my side in the future, yet I care about him, just as I care about all my faithful servants. Allies, advisors, commanders, protectors, whatever name they take. But as a lover, his days have come and gone. And as a love? As a match? He was never what I wanted. He could never be what I need."

"I understand."

"Do you know the moment I knew I wanted you? Really wanted you?" He shakes his head and her smile deepens. "I said it was too much to ask for a wolf to ride a dragon. And you flustered."

"I wasn't flustered," he denies.

"No?"

Before he can be sure where she's going with this, Dany has undone her coat and let it fall. She fists the fabric of her skirt, drawing it out of her way, and then puts her knee to the bed. She comes to him slowly, purposefully, and Jon is frozen under her focus, held still, anticipating. She straddles his thighs, kneeling above his lap, her body stretched tall, leaving him longing for the weight of her to settle. She takes his hands and sets them on her legs, guiding them upwards beneath the sleek fabric, up until he's got her by the hips.

She brings her mouth over his, lips parted, brushing without pressure, exhaling on him, lingering there on the precipice of real contact. While that mouth distracts him, her hands slip from his and go to his breeches, opening, slipping in, taking hold of his cock in strong fingers to make him jolt. He's half hard just from watching her sultry climb up the bed to him, so she doesn't need to work him. She guides him forward with decided focus, sinks onto him with a smooth jut of her hips, her back
bowing, her fingers going to dig at his shoulders.

"Technically," he rasps against her lips as she starts moving, a slow sharp tempo, "this would be a dragon riding a wolf, wouldn't it?"

Dany drops her head and groans into his throat, fits her hips tighter against his with a sudden tilt that hitchis his breath. She keeps to a torturous pace, and he intends to stay rigid beneath her, but eventually he reaches his limit. His grip turns demanding. She starts to lift up in another horribly gentle ebb and Jon drags her down hard, making their hipbones knock, wrenching a grunting exclamation out of her. She fists a hand in his curls in response, rising to meet his mouth, their kiss biting.

All he had to do was ask. She quickens the rhythm. They roughen it together.

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King's Landing is a beautiful city. Golden and luxurious. Until it's not. She listens to her resident guide as he lays its glory before her, then she moves past him. She keeps riding and she descends into its seething ugliness. Overpopulated and sprawling with slums, festering with sickness and poverty, a sparkling jewel that's all paint to hide the despair and corruption that lies beneath.

The Great Sept and the streets around it for a league have been left in ruin, a site of charred rubble and immeasurable grief. Taverns chase away the homeless that sleep in the sewage at their steps. Whorehouses double for orphanages. Refugees displaced by the War of Five Kings fill up stables not even fit for horses. Merchants peddle desperately on every corner but the markets are dismal places and no one seems to have coin to buy. In fact, the only establishments she sees that are flourishing are the noblemen brothels on the higher end of the Street of Silk.

"A lot of these marks are the doing of the Lannisters," says the man Varys brought to her when the guide the capital lords provided her proved unsatisfying. His little bird has rode her and her companions through the streets half the day now, stopping occasionally into places to delve deeper, explaining the history and the current status of what she sees, answering every question with thorough unbiased explanations. "It's been in decline for years, from King Robert's neglect to the tyranny of King Joffrey and the incompetence of Tommen. But Cersei brought us well beyond the tipping point. The High Sparrow and his Faith Militant did the rest."

Daenerys was aware she would find this city in disrepair. She's heard enough stories from those that lived and left here to find her. But she wasn't prepared for this walk to be worse than the one she'd taken through Meereen, doing the same as she does now, gauging her conquest, measuring the worth and the work needing to be done. And there is a lot of work ahead. So much, it seems impossible.

While they explore, she's planning, considering, noting orders she'll hand out to her council here. It'll all have to be delegated to trustworthy agents of course, since she can't be distracted yet from the northern war. So she must thrust them into such drastic changes before she goes that the momentum will be unable to be stalled.

Starting with the people that don't belong here, that don't want to be here, chased into this filth by war and famine. They must settle refugees elsewhere. There's vast land across the southern regions now no longer hostile to them. Thin out the density of the populace in the capital and ease the strain that worsens its squalor, she assumes. Distribution of the overflowing food stores in the keep that its highborns have been hoarding. The shanty settlements just outside the city walls and the crime ridden slums of Flea Bottom will need to be rousted. As well, the Guildhall of the Alchemists will need to be dealt with. No more wildfire below the capital, waiting on treachery or an accident. And it could be of vital use against the Others.
When Arya infiltrated the city, she'd taken a Gold Cloak face first. In the process of getting close to Qyburn, she'd followed him down into the Guildhall and observed him and his brethren plotting. Learned all about the dangers that lurk underground here. When she took his face, she used Qyburn's own little birds to dismantle all Cersei's traps and precautions set ahead of the summit. Such as the cache under the Dragonpit triggered to ignite, possibly as a defensive tactic against treachery from the other side, but more likely her goal all along. Deny them their truce then walk out and leave them to burn, just as she did the Great Sept.

Half the city was scorched in that explosion. Decimated. As if these people's suffering wasn't harsh enough.

Her next change begins in the Red Keep. Cleanse the City Watch, disband Cersei's corrupt Gold Cloaks, give them less important work to do, fill the Watch up again with Second Sons and Reachers for now. New blood to help the rebuild.

Infrastructure, trade, education, welfare, justice. The cornerstones of a healthy society. She may not have known what she was doing when she started her march through Slaver's Bay all those years ago, but she's been learning. Finding the right minds, asking the right questions. Imagining the right outcomes.

She leads the procession, Jhiqui at her one side, Jon at her other, and Davos behind him, while Daario keeps close at her back, standing guard. But it is less a royal procession and more a discreet ranging party, all dressed down in casual linens and leathers to blend into the crowds, a headscarf wrapped fashionably to disguise her. And because she's disguised, everywhere she goes, she's exposed to the raw truth, just as she'd needed to be. She hears just how much of them are spiteful after the changing of the crowns, just how much are hopeful in an unlikely rescuer, and she feels just how much of the city is in panic.

Along the Street of Sisters, they reach a particularly wretched square on the outskirts of Flea Bottom. A huddled mass is gathering before a septon, elevated by the stone of a broken statue, preaching over them in his dirty robes. He doesn't have good things to say about their new queen. He calls her a heretic. A demon whore in command of monsters that will rain fire and sin and damnation on them. According to the good septon, she'll destroy what's left of their sinful city and feed their children to her beasts. They must repent. They've brought this on themselves. Only the Seven will save them now. If they try to run, she'll lock the gates and alight King's Landing.

"I love religion," Daario quips.

"This is not religion, son," Davos grimly insists. "This is the twisting men give it."

"It's just a crackpot," Jon dismisses, wanting them to move on.

Deeply troubled, Jhiqui murmurs at her shoulder, "They should cut out his tongue for speaking of the Great Khaleesi so."

"I don't think that's necessary," Daenerys tells her, amusement shaping her lips. "In fact, I think this is the place we've been looking for." Then she switches to the Dothraki woman's native tongue to ensure there's no confusion in her handmaiden's task. "Fetch the carts, my friend."

No one who knows her well has ever accused her of wasting an opportunity when it presents itself, so the queen waits while her Dothraki mounts her horse and rushes back to the caravan. She stays Daario's careless hand when he grips the hilt of his blade at his belt and itches to intervene. Turns her head to offer Jon a warm smile, trying to quell the trouble that darkens his brow, trying to show him that none of their words or spite can upset her. She's heard much worse. She'll always have those that
hate her, that twist who she is to fit their perspectives. It's only the fear that bothers her. It pleases her to make cruel men with power they don't deserve wet themselves, but not these people. Not sickly and starving and unwashed families in the streets that are terrified another monster will take something else from them.

Unsullied ride into the square, dragging carts piled high with supplies. Suspicion and panic surge through the crowd and they start to scatter. That's when Daenerys steps forward. She beckons the riders to unhook the carts just beyond the septon's chosen pulpit and she stands below it, giving him no heed. She pulls the scarf from her hair, exposing herself, and raises her voice, gentled but projected.

"Please stay."

She could climb up beside him, force him down into the crowd, and put herself above them so they can see her clearly. But she doesn't. She stays on the ground. She watches them, lets them look their full of her, summoning all the calm and caring she has in her to the surface. Her Unsullied begin pulling stacks off the carts, handing out blankets and shoes and sacks of small essentials and baskets of food. Hesitant men and women and children taking what's offered into their grasps, confusion on their faces, heartbreaking wariness. As if it must be some trick.

"My name is Daenerys Stormborn," she tells them, leaving off all the intimidating titles she's sure they've heard before. "These men are my Unsullied. Whatever you've been told, they are loyal and honorable soldiers. They protect me … and they help me to protect all those I've dedicated to care for." She resists the impulse to clasp her hands in front of her, wanting to appear as soft and open as possible. "Like my Unsullied, my dragons will not harm you. You see, I only hurt my enemies, and my enemies are only those that stand against me. Or those that seek to threaten anyone under my protection. This land, you people, are now under my protection. On my word, I will do all that I can to do right by you."

"Lies!" the septon shouts, looking out to them desperately. "This is the dragon's whore, can't you see? She'll trick you.

"If you believed her half as bad as you say, you wouldn't be brave enough to stand up there spitting on her," Jon challenges, and she sends him a surprised look, not expecting his participation.

Zealousness in his eyes, the septon ignores him, shouting, "There's a reason they call her the Bride of Fire! She's made a pact with dark unholy forces to bring her beasts back into the world! Her price is the meek and the wretched and the righteous alike! She'll consume our souls—"

"Shut up!" comes a little angry voice from the crowd. A boy barely at the height of the hips around him, swallowed up by them. His arms are full bread and fruit. His feet, she sees, are bare and blackened by grime and full of sores.

A burly man from the opposite direction resounds, "Let her talk."

Daenerys gives the boy a sweet smile in the pointed silence that follows, as they wait to hear her. In the last wagon of the caravan, instead of supplies, there are men and women climbing out, kits on their shoulders. Local maesters and her Ghiscari and Dothraki healers. She lifts a hand, beckoning them into the crowd. "Healers will be here all day to help those fallen ill or old injuries. For those that can't travel, one will follow if summoned. When the day is done, the apothecary and the infirmary of the Red Keep will be open freely to anyone in need."

And as she says it, she realizes what she wants to do with the Guildhall. No more pyromancers, no new wildfire production. The alchemist lair will be opened to the light. It will house healers for the
public.

With a look to her handmaiden, their eyes lock and she nods her head towards the boy that'd spoken for her. Jhiqui weaves through the people to him, crouches and speaks her stilted Common Tongue until he takes her hand and follows her up to the statue. On the other side of its base from the glowering septon, she hoists the boy up to sit and sets a healer's kit in the dirt. She takes a rag damp with healing herbs and oils and works to clean and bandage the boy’s feet, while he watches Daenerys beyond her bent curly head, chewing thoughtfully on a pear.

As this happens, the queen continues to address the crowd, which grows ever larger as murmurs race their way up and down the streets. The fear and distrust, like a living thing between them all, morphs slowly into excitement. "There will be a feast at the Red Keep tomorrow, a celebration for the beginning of a new age. I encourage everyone that would like to come. No matter where you were born or the clothes on your back, you will be welcome. You will be safe."

"And then?" somebody wonders brashly from the far back.

"For all the time I am in your city, I will be receiving its citizens. Each and every soul that comes to me. I will hear your concerns and your requests. When I move north, the council I leave in my stead will continue to hear you." By now, the septon has lost his audience thoroughly and he knows it. He doesn't resist Daario taking his elbow and urging him down and out of the way. Leaving aside some of the gentleness for something more galvanizing now, she says, "Great change is upon us all, in many different ways, and we are determined to make it glorious. Work with us to achieve it and we will all prosper together."

She leaves them with that.

Turning to the boy, she watches Jhiqui finish up then take a pair of child shoes from an Unsullied and lace them over his bandages. When her gaze rises from the task, she finds him peering at her face so boldly, Daenerys has to suppress a grin. "What is your name?"

"Willas Rivers."

"Do you have someone, Willas?"

"Nobody, Dragon Queen. My mother brought me here when I was a babe to get out of the way of the Stark march. She was in the Great Sept when it blew."

"I'm sorry," she murmurs. And then impulsively, "Would you like to ride with us back to the keep?"

He seems bewildered. "What would I do in the keep?"

"Well, I don't know," she muses, a hint of the tones she uses with Jaeh creeping in. "I'm sure we could find a way to busy you."

He looks between the queen and Jhiqui, then another suspicious glance beyond them to Jon and Daario and Davos, the men all hovering now that she's finished with her theater. Then he just shrugs, pulling his armload tighter. "I can keep this?"

"Yes."

"Okay."

"Okay," Daenerys echoes, just a bit playfully.
As she strides away from the carts, crowds swarming them now, Jon falls into step beside her. She likes it, him beside her. It feels natural. But she can't tell quite what his tone is when he notes, "You play that game better than I've ever seen."

"It's not a game to me, Jon."

"Aye, but you know what I mean," he persists, leveling her sidelong with a keen gaze. "You're more the politician than you claim to be."

"Just because my compassion is calculated," she counters mildly, "doesn't mean I'm not compassionate."

"I know. That's what gives it so much power."

Once she swings up into her saddle, she focuses down on his face, his hand settling absently on her knee. "Are you disapproving or complimenting?"

His brow is furrowed under the sun, but his bronze eyes glimmer. He smiles.

Before he departs King's Landing, Davos has someone he would like to check up on. It drives him down to the Street of Steel, to the forge he thinks he'll find him in. But the smith says, "Just missed the halfwit. Vanished sometime after the dragon bitch's show. Must've lost his mind, I don't know."

This is not good.

When she sees the sprawling mural painted across the stonework of the atrium at the top of the Holdfast, detailing all of the Seven Kingdoms in vivid beautiful shades, Daenerys has a dining table brought in and set over the sea.

Their fifth morning in King's Landing, she finds herself breaking fast around it with Jon and Arya. Lady Brienne tries to take a post at the archway, stiff and awkward, but the queen insists she join them. If he weren't avoiding her, Tyrion would be with them as well. Davos comes and goes briskly, still too uncomfortable in her presence to linger, she suspects. After awhile, Qhono and Grey Worm make their way across from her, one the epitome of dignity, the other straddling a chair backwards and pawing into the spread, making the lady knight grimace at him. She and Arya share a grin past Jon.

Jhiqui is the first with her but slips away unnoticed. When most of the others finish eating and drift away, her friend returns, waiting at the archway for attention. Once the queen meets her eyes, she says in Dothraki, "Khaleesi, a small man is very insistent he see Lady Stark. He swears she will care to."

There's nothing but blandness from the girl and wariness from her brother when she translates, so Daenerys nods. "Bring him in."

Past the guards come a dark-haired light-skinned man she doesn't recognize, but Arya obviously does. The girl rises slowly out of her seat, shock and trouble on her face and some fervent emotion until it pushes down and she schools her features back to that self-protective blandness. He seems steady, standing his ground in the archway, but nerves belie him by the way his thumb scrapes at his knuckles, digging, glancing over the Dragon Queen before his eyes get stuck completely on the king's sister.
"They said Arya Stark killed the queen. Had to see it for myself."

"You're not dead," is all she says.

The intrusiveness of the moment becomes swiftly unavoidable, so Daenerys tells Jon, "Perhaps we're needed elsewhere."

He turns his head to frown at her. She lifts an eyebrow. He exhales in defeat. Lets her take his elbow and discreetly force him out of the room, ignoring the way his heels drag and his eyes keep pulling back towards his sister and the stranger. Jhiqui falls into place behind them, Dothraki men flanking them down the golden corridors. As they're out of earshot, he says, "That must've been him."

"Who?"

"The one she was willing to kill a Red Witch for."

"She's not a child anymore, Jon," she tells him, gently but firmly, because his discomfort is clear and she'd rather he not start brooding again so soon. "We both know she can more than readily take care of herself."

"Maybe."

"Definitely."

"Dany," he sighs, a hint of exasperation creeping into his tone. Laughing just a bit at the helplessness of it, her fingers tighten in the bend of his elbow, her loose hand rising to pat his shoulder, rubbing reassuringly. "It's not funny. I don't care how many kills she's got under her belt. She's too young for men."

"Let her decide whether that's true or not."

"Must I?"

"It will be good practice for our daughters," she says, very casually, not looking his way anymore, pulling him forward when he would falter, stunned at the thought.

Behind them, Jhiqui grins.

The feast is a messy event. Cobbled together hastily, every cook in the city needed to prepare enough food to feed everyone that ends up flooding through the keep walls. The lords and their guard are appalled, as they've been almost nonstop since she arrived, but the rest of the city is brimming with excitement and joy. Fresh energy in a way, they say, King's Landing has not seen in years.

It may not be graceful, but it serves its purpose well, so Daenerys is thrilled.

While the commoners rejoice, she keeps her court working.

With the rat's nest Kingsguard disbanded beside their Gold Cloaks, the White Sword Tower has plenty of room to house her new City Watch.

She means to make sanctuary wherever she can afford. Opening the Red Keep in shelter, orphaned children are rounded up off the streets and pulled from the brothels where they're in turns neglected or exploited. They are made a home out of the Maidenvault. A gilded prison with a repugnant history turned into a welcoming haven. Another tower takes in the homeless and convalescents that have
been left to fend for themselves, those that refuse to venture out west and south with the refugees, that feel they belong here, born and raised for better or worse. People devoted to the capital who just need help getting back on their feet.

"Give them better jobs. Pay them fair wages. The first task I can think of is clearing the debris left to fester from the ruins of the Great Sept," she declares, "and rebuilding in its place."

"The war chest is taking all the gold you have at your disposal," her advisors argue ardently. "How will we pay for that?"

So she coolly retorts, "Let me worry about the debt I incur. You just get it done."

"What shall they build? Another sept?"

"If a sept is what they want."

"What does that mean?"

"Ask the people. Let them build what they decide on."

The gathered lords about lose their minds at all her orders before the day is done and Daenerys finds herself swinging between impatience and enjoying their vexation. By the time she gets around to clearing out the dungeons beneath the keep, they're ready to run. The deeper levels are ordered closed out, no more sick tortures for no purpose but sadism. Brought before her one by one, she'll hear every man's case and decide if it was justly imprisonment. Who knows what the Lannisters have been locking people up for all these years?

If she hadn't intercepted Euron Greyjoy's ship, she might've found the Sand girls suffering down there.

Along those lines, she also orders the desecration of the Traitor's Walk to be disassembled, heads on pikes in a macabre celebration, arranged like flowers for ladies to admire on their afternoon strolls alongside. She hadn't intended to give it another thought until she finds Arya going out to watch the destruction of it, and the girl tells her, "My father's head spent time up there."

"Should we leave it barren? Or should we make it a climbing garden?" she suggests, pulling the girl away from her darkness.

Leaving Daario and the Sand Snakes to bring King's Landing to heel is a decision she has little qualms for, despite any objection. Under an unhappy Tyrion's guidance, to keep the scheming lords under control, to bring order in her name. She settles all the arrangements that must be made while she's in the capital and she calls forth the armies of the Seven Kingdoms. Every single one. She sends them marching northward, gathering supplies, preparing for an unprecedented arrival.

Soldiers will need barracks. Food, shelter, weapons. And strategy.

Some of the northerners will have to be moved south to make room. Now that there are fewer hostile border lines, safe zones shall be established, where room will be made for the displaced, where people may flee to gain distance from the warzone. From winter.

It's Jon's decision. It's a good decision. But he warns that his people will not take kindly to it. Northerners don't run from hardship. They certainly don't run south. But times are changing.
"What do you want to do about the Dornish Marches?" Tyrion questions.

She looks to her Hand, to the rest of her advisors, then she looks to Jon. Their gazes lock and sentiment passes between them. She dips her chin. "Let the Marcher lords and their Lannister remnants go to waste in their Red Mountains. Should they like to surrender, we'll welcome them. Until then, send envoys in. Make sure the smallfolk know anyone seeking refuge will be safe regardless, if they'd rather not starve out with their lords and soldiers."

Once the meeting is ended and the council disperses, she's left with only her Hand to keep her company, lingering in his seat across the massive table, lost in his pitcher as he's been for days. Being back where he came from has not been good for the little lion man. She hates to be leaving him behind like this. His mood clearly tells her to let him be, but she stays in her seat as well. She watches him.

"I'd like to see the living conditions improved here when I return. There are too many slums and too much suffering. Too many kings and queens have been derelict in their duties here. I don't care what funds it takes."

"I'll get a legion of city planners working on the project," he drawls, dismissive.

"Would you like to discuss it?" she offers after another while, breaking the uncomfortable quiet that keeps settling.

"What's there to discuss?"

"You have a right to be mad, Tyrion."

"Our queen is very understanding," he grants, but then hardens. "I asked you. I asked you not to fly north on some fool's errand."

"Saving Arya Stark was not a fool's errand. Look at what it's reaped."

"You didn't know any of this would come of that. You knew nothing about the girl. You only knew she was sister to Jon Snow. You knew Jon Snow would never love you if you let her die. That's why you went north. And you returned with two dragons. That was the cost of your feelings for this man."

"Viserion was not Jon's fault."

"No," he agrees, and she sees the words in his eyes, though he'd never say them. *It wasn't Jon's fault. It was yours.* "That was a woman's decision, not our queen's. You can't do that. You can't afford to make those decisions, not when we all face the consequences of them."

"I know that."

"I warned you that you could not afford to love him."

"Bring yourself to what this is really about," she demands, sharp, hurt, defensive.

"I had a right to know," he says. "I asked you not to go north and you did anyway. Then you constructed a conspiracy to take the throne behind my back."

"To kill your sister, you mean."

"Why did you lie to me? Was it that you didn't trust me not to warn her, or was it that you knew I
"Would talk you out of it?"

"Both," she admits. "And also, if I'm being honest, it was to protect you, just as I protected Jon."

"I'm your Hand—"

"She was your sister. You should not have had to plot her death."

"I'm so grateful," is his bitter return, refilling his wine, lifting it towards him.

Daenerys pitches forward in her seat, laying a hand over his cup before it can reach his mouth, urging it back to the table, her fingers lingering over his. He won't look up and meet her eyes, but she's heartfelt when she murmurs, "I'm sorry you're hurting." Then she struggles to express the next, to do something for him, to give him something. Tentatively, "If it can be managed, when Jaime Lannister makes himself known, I would have his life spared."

She means what she says, despite the dilemma the man represents.

It wasn't Cersei that had outwitted her and her court time and time again, after all. It was the Kingslayer. He could be quite an asset to her as a battle commander, if she could force him to submit. But she could never trust him. He would have to have no feasible allies left alive to turn to before she could ever make him one of her commanders. And even then, sabotage would always be likely.

It's a shame. He's a rare worthy adversary.

Finally, Tyrion raises his gaze. His bitterness softens into genuine grief and the tired defeat that's lurked beneath. Apologetically, he echoes, "I'm sorry you're hurting."

And they sit in silence, in the knowledge of all they've lost.
Chapter 15

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I Fought The War, It's Time To Go Home

It's snowing by the time they return to Dragonstone.

Reports come in. Resistance, banners that haven't answered, blockades and sabotage of their provision shipments. Dragonglass forged into weapons, arming the soldiers, hardly more than half enough for their numbers yet. Scholars from Oldtown, from citadels beyond, sending back scrolls of useless myth and unfinished pieces that won't save them. All the spies and researchers she sent to search for intelligence on the Long Night and the White Walkers, for clues to how the first war was won, none of them have brought good news.

The worst of it is the storms that have hit so hard along the eastern seaboard. One after another, together at once, spreading, surprising. They can't be predicted. They offer no churning warning in the skies before they strike. There seems to be no rhyme or reason to their patterns.

Half her forces are chased indoors, trapped in place, unable to progress. The infighting happening among her newest additions are that much harder to quell when her loyalists cannot reach them to bring order.

Ships get wrecked en route. Vital cargo from Essos sinks, all the goods lost, replacements delayed. Food shortages. Merchant ships have been busier these last months than they've been in years. But if this continues, if more provisions are wasted this way, the resources that gather them will be tapped. Hundreds of thousands of men will starve or freeze before the Night King even has a chance to attack.

She hates the thought of this, but she considers putting the kingdoms on rations. Allocating grain to the regions that need it most, that are dwindling the hardest. She's in such a precarious position in her reign already. The people would not understand the grand scale. They would see the murderous new queen taking food out of their mouths, their children's mouths, and giving it to her favorites. There would be too many uprisings to manage if it came to that.

It hasn't come to that yet, but it's likely to soon if things don't turn around.

Lighter storms swirl around Dragonstone, not as devastating as what some of her people have been seeing, but still dangerous. The unrest of the sea delays their voyage, trapped on the island, waiting to sail north.

They use the time for planning.

Talking with Jon, getting distracted by the strategizing, the focus, leaning in, council half forgotten at the carved table around them. Coming eventually around to, "At Hardhome, they didn't go in after the wildlings, not even to escape the fire."

"They can't swim," he confirms. Hopes. "If we could somehow use land forces to herd them towards the coastlines, we could wage a stronger assault from fleets at sea with fire missiles and dragonglass projectiles. We'd take so fewer losses that way."

"Can dead men be herded?"
Jaeh is becoming more talkative by the day. He's forming complete sentences more often than just random words now. Though he still mixes haphazardly between tongues, so it's hard for Jon to keep up. If he had time, he'd set himself to learn Dothraki for the boy's sake. But there's no time for that. There's only this, seizing what little time he does have before he must go, appreciating the gift he's been given on this island with his son and his sister and the woman he loves before it's taken from him.

Short lived family moments, he and Arya reacquainting, watching her soften and come alive and restore some semblance of the child she'd been as she gets to know her nephew, as they play, Ghost between them too.

Outside, the world is falling apart, but on this island…

His life is nearly perfect.

Nearly, because Dany belongs here with them. But coming back to Dragonstone seems to deepen her pain rather than relieve it. Her grief comes and goes in waves in a way he intimately understands. He wants to be able to comfort her, but she keeps herself distant when she's not in the war room, off somewhere alone or with her dragons in the cold rain. Mourning.

Since that raven first came to Dragonstone, there's been no time to try to repair what's been damaged. Now there is time, there is peace and restlessness, but she is far away somehow.

Until one night, he returns Jaeh to the queen's chambers and he finds her laid on the floor under her hearth, so close to the crackling fire that embers fall to her skin. Her eyes are empty, fixed on the flame, something hollow on her face that unnerves him. She hasn't cried. She hasn't given any sign of distress since she plunged into the waters sailing away from Eastwatch. She's been steady.

Jon lowers the sleeping babe into his crib before he crosses to his mother. He crouches there, studying her when she doesn't react, unsure, but then he sighs. He gives up restraint and lets instinct move him into picking her up off the cold floor, carrying her to her bed. He lays her down and pulls the furs over her. Before he can turn away and leave her, her voice stops him.

"I dream that winter will never end," she confesses. "It will kill us all."

Jon sinks into the dread he's been holding at bay.

*My dreams come true.*

How many times had she told him as much?

"We won't let that happen," he commands, pushing memories out of his mind. He sits down on the edge of the bed, wills her to meet his gaze, to revive her fire with the intensity there. Swearing, "I won't let that happen to us."

*I will never let anything destroy my family,* he thinks.

He never expected to have that. To be a father, to love someone so fiercely, to build something like a tree that's taken root and struggles to grow. He never expected to have Arya back, to have Sansa, to be someone that could decide for himself what to do, that had the power over his own fate. Oaths don't matter anymore. Bastards don't matter. He makes his own fate now. And he decides that his family is the most important thing. His family comes first.
I will find the Night King. I will find a way to put him down. I will break him into dead icy shards with my bare hands if that's what it takes before I ever let him steal this away from me.

"Stay," she whispers then, when she decides to believe him, groggy, half asleep. Her hand falls from her brow, warm fingers falling over his. It's the faintest touch until he twists his wrist and takes it tightly. "Please."

So he stays.

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"Tell me a story," she implores.

"A good story?" he asks, wondering if he can even recall one of those.

Softly in the night quiet, Dany says, "Tell me something that haunts you."

He could speak of the Night King and his creatures. He can always speak of that, seems sometimes to never speak of anything else. But she knows everything he could say. He sees the same things she sees in the fight to come. He fears the same things she fears. He won't say it, not to her, not when she needs him to remind her of her stubborn optimism. He knows what she wants to hear. She wants more of his old life, the darker truths he skimmed over in the meadow, the harder things to tell. She's bared her soul so much to banish his feelings of being an outsider, he won't deny her whatever pieces of himself she asks for. But he wishes she wouldn't ask. Not this. Not now.

It's not what she needs tonight.

"Your worst stories are awful things that happened to you. My worst stories are awful things I've done. Things that've happened to other people. Ygritte—"

"That wasn't on you, Jon. You're not the one that put those arrows in her. You're not the one that forced her to scale the Wall and attack Castle Black."

"What choice did the Night's Watch leave them? My Watch."

"You both made your own choices for your own people," she insists. "You're not to blame for that."

"And Qhorin? Am I not to blame for him as well? You can't say that when I drove my own sword through his chest." But when her lips part to refute him, he preempts her. "We've enough haunting us right now. I'd rather tell you about something better. I'd rather tell you more about your great great uncle."

"You rarely speak of Aemon Targaryen."

"I rarely speak of any good things, do I?" he realizes regretfully. With a half smile, jokes, "We should work on that."

It gets a laugh out of Dany. "Well, go on then."

"No man was wiser. He was the first to show me kindness at the Wall. He was the first to rest his faith in me. It was his vote cast that made me Lord Commander. But even before that, from the very beginning, his words are what grounded me. If it weren't for his guidance, I don't know that I would've made it this far."

"Perhaps he had the touch of Valyrian dreams," she teases, and he's glad to see her maudlin mood
growing playful. "Perhaps he knew he needed to look after you until I could find you for myself."

Because he feels proud of pulling that out of her, Jon keeps talking.

Snowfall remains a slow drifting thing, but it piles up over the weeks, turning green cliffs into plush white blankets of powder. It makes it harder for the children to play their games, kicking their balls, chasing and fetching, hiding and seeking. The beach has become too dangerous with the stormy weather, so they can't even build their sand castles. But the snow brings new wonders for these desert babes.

Jon didn't expect to enjoy it this much, not just for Jaeh's sake, but seeing them all happy and thriving together. These foreign kids with their unfamiliar ways. All of these people, her people, her freed slaves that've found new lives and new joys and new harmony. There's something about them he finds inspiring. Their happiness, their hope, their contentment. They came from a terrible place. Their existence was the lowest life can get, and yet here they are, a community he finds himself inexplicably envying. Half of him wishes he could stay here. There's just something so isolating about this island, in the best way, something simple and fulfilling. He'd been the happiest he'd ever experienced in that meadow with Dany. Until Dragonstone.

Even with all their troubles, it's been the greatest era of his life here.

He'd been helping the men in the mine before his sister ventured into the dark caverns, Jaeh on her hip, the two of them exploring like troublemakers, telling each other wild stories to scare and scintillate. In between hacks of his pickaxe, his son's laughter echoed off the obsidian walls and he'd had to herd them out. Ended up lured with them over to the cacophony of revelry.

Parents have spread out across the incline, blankets and pallets and mats thrown over the powder to sit and shiver, watching over the little ones. Dothraki braziers have been set around, burning in the cutting wind, struggling to endure. Some sing, and others dance, keeping the blood warm. Drogon circles overhead, restless and aggravated, he gets the sense, but the smaller one settles among them when his mother joins them, coiling in the snow as children dart around him.

Arya scans the stretch, surveying their company. "I keep expecting screaming and running. At least some nervousness."

"They don't mind the dragons," Dany says, a soft smile at her lips, lounging at the opposite corner of their mat, legs stretched out in front of her, ankles crossed, one hand behind her to prop her. "The dragons set them free."

"How did you tame them?" his sister wants to know, an edge of intensity entering her face, eagerness at all the thoughts she's had since meeting her.

But it complicates his queen's expression. A slight furrow in her brow, a press to the lips, the shadow of trouble. Surprisingly open with the girl, she admits, "I don't know that they are tame. I built a bond with them, almost as you would foster any other relationship. I've worked to make them understand the importance of life and the difference between food, enemy, and innocents. It hasn't come easy, and they may not always agree with my perspective, but they've come to respect my values."

"I'd love to go up again someday."

"Quit needling, Arya," Jon chides lightly.

"Shut up, you."
"Next time I fly," Dany promises, "I'll take you with me."

With a wicked grin aimed at him, his sister proclaims, "You did good, brother."

And Dany laughs. For that, he could kiss the little brat. He messes at her hair instead, victorious when she swats him away, annoyed. Ignoring their antics, the queen leans past the mat edge to smooth a hand down Jaeh's back where he's bent over the snow, drawing through the powder with a stick. "What's that, love?"

"A seeder!"

"Centaur?"

The lad nods wildly. "Center."

"Centaur."

"Center."

"Close enough," she laughs. "But centaurs don't have wings. This one's got a little griffin in him."

"Those not wings, Mama!" he complains, exasperated. "Arakhs. See? He's going fighting. Big krakens over there."

"Oh, how silly of me. Of course they are. I see now."

As the lad spills into an excited rant about the ensuing battle he's written across the snow, his Common Tongue falters, not paying attention, falling into Valyrian without noticing. Jon can't make much sense of it from there, beyond a few familiar phrases once in awhile, but that's just fine. Jaeh's face says it all, and the pitch and jolts and drops of his voice, the way he'll suddenly spin around and throw both hands out at his mother to make her jump, roaring in reenactment.

Sparing Arya a fond sidelong, he says, "Just like you when you were that age."

"Really?"

"Aye. Nobody could keep up with your imagination."

"That's terrible," Dany laments when his tone gets dramatically grave. "And did he save them?"

Jaeh nods again, jumping to his feet to run around the sprawling pictures, stabbing his stick into a swirl of hectic shapes. "With the basker!"

"Basilisk?"

"Aye," Jaeh answers, straightening to suddenly give her a serious look as he does. Jon can't help grinning. It's not the first sign of him rubbing off on his son. He's quite the little mimic. But it gets him in the chest every time.

"This centaur hero has got quite the pantheon, hasn't he?"

He nods again, fast and jerky and vibrating with energy, even though he surely has no idea what the word pantheon means. He starts to spin toward the far eastern stretch of his tale and stops sharply, finding Ghost having laid down over an apparently crucial point in the action. "Wolf!" he hollers in shock and betrayal, his arms throwing wide. The stick drops and he lunges at Ghost to shove his hands into the wolf's furry side, trying and failing to roll him off. Frustration leads him to look for
help over his shoulder. "Papa!"

Trying not to laugh, Jon says, "Ghost, to me."

But when the wolf stands, Jaeh's left blinking defeatedly at a smear of powder, no sketching left. "Wolf," he whines, that initial betrayal sinking in.

At the tone, Ghost dismisses Jon's command, twisting back around and nosing his muzzle under the lad's chin, making his face wrinkle at the wetness. He shoves the wolf away and Ghost cranes his neck to look back to Jon, red eyes seeming to flounder for advice.

"Don't ask me. You did it."

So he drops his head and heaves a long suffering breath. Prowls around Jaeh, circling slowly, considering. Finally he rams his head into the lad's back, knocking him over into the snow. And when Jaeh whips around, indignant, it's to watch Ghost snatch up his discarded stick between his fangs and take off running. Skirting a wide berth around the lazing green dragon, his pace stays slow enough to give Jaeh a chance at keeping up.

"Help!" the lad shouts in Valyrian, calling reinforcements as he goes, and a swarm of bigger kids converge in the wolf's wake, Jaeh leading the charge.

"He's too small to be this wild," Arya tells his parents, very amused, mildly concerned. "How will we ever keep him alive?"

"With a village," Dany mourns, only half joking. Then her bright eyes go past his sister and her face shifts

Jon turns his head, following her gaze down the incline to find the blacksmith making his way up. He's even shorter than Jon, so he's practically swallowed up by the Dothraki Queensguard that surround him, getting jostled from every jovial thrust from a boisterous warrior. He looks frozen and miserable. It almost makes Jon soften towards him. Then he remembers the way he'd looked at Arya in the Holdfast and he feels his scowl return. "Somebody's making friends."

"How is Gendry getting along?" Dany asks, innocently enough to earn herself a look of suspicion.

"Wouldn't know." Arya is pretending not to notice him, but she can't quite keep herself from looking over, unhappiness in the furrow of her brow and the darkening of her eyes. It makes Jon's dread deepen.

"Perhaps you should go to him. You may feel better if you get to have an honest conversation."

"I've nothing to say to him."

"He followed you here from King's Landing. He means to follow us north."

"I didn't ask him for that."

"I know. I did."

Jon forgets he'd been pretending not to eavesdrop, probably about as convincingly as Arya's pretending to not care. His head jerks back in their direction. "You did what?"

"Well, I didn't ask. But I extended the invitation. He was rather eager."

"Perhaps you should mind your own business," Arya snaps, startling her brother in her abrupt
"Arya!" he scolds. For fuck's sake, she's still speaking to a queen.

But Dany just keeps smiling that enigmatic smile of hers, knowing and amused. "It's obvious even to a stranger that you're very important to him."

"He was my friend," she tells them, heated and quick, resentful. But they both feel the rawness beneath it. "He was the best friend I ever had. Right up until he decided to leave me. I asked him to stay. I pleaded. I swore I could be his family. And he left me. He trusted the good for nothing Brotherhood over me. He made his choice. Why should I care what he wants now?"

"It's your choice," is all Dany answers, calculatedly placid. "If he's not someone that matters to you anymore, then that's your prerogative."

Which should close the topic on a harmonious note, but Arya looks away from her nephew in the distance to send his queen a mutinous glare. And Jon knows she's gotten under his sister's skin, exactly as she'd intended. He's not sure how he feels about that. About any of this. He's sure that he doesn't wanna weigh in on it though, pretty damn sure about that. And yet he's staring at his baby sister's face, seeing the hurt there buried under anger and confusion, and he finds himself saying, "This is somebody you grieved, Arya. Somebody you wanted vengeance for. Maybe, for your sake, it would be better if you just appreciated getting the chance to meet again."

"You two are perfect for each other," she bitterly accuses, climbing to her feet and stalking off through the snow.

Leaving Jon and Dany locked in the other's gaze, him feeling helpless and iron footed while she appears the epitome of patience. She gives him a soothing look, warmth in her smile, in her eyes, caressing the ice of his veins.

"C'mere," he murmurs, tipping his head, mouth curving. There's a beat of hesitation, as they both linger through memory, then she's rolling gracefully to her knees and stretching to him, hands on his thighs. His cold gloveless fingers find her flushed cheeks, slipping down to the edge of her jaw, his thumb fitting into the dip of her chin as their mouths open against each other, sipping off each other.

For just a moment, the world around them slides away.

Then it shatters sharp while she's pulling slowly back, savoring, before her eyes rise over him and widen. Her palm slams at his shoulder and she barks, "Jon!"

He twists to see what she wants, just as Jaeh is climbing up Rhaegal's swishing tail. He jumps to his feet and lunges, rushing to snatch him before the dragon can lift him too high into the air. "Not so fast, troublemaker." The surge of panic dissipates before it really gets started and he laughs in its relief, holding the disappointed lad to his chest as he returns him to his mother. Saying, "It'll be quite awhile until you're big enough to be a dragonrider."

Dany relaxes back to the mat, hand to her heart, eyes narrowing in reprimand when he drops to his knees and plants Jaeh between them. "You unruly thing, what have we said about climbing?"

The conversation they must have about Jaehaerys is something neither has looked forward to. But it must be had. The storm is waning. They're running out of time. Soon they'll be gone. They must have it.
"I don't want to bring him into a warzone," she says, leaving an opening for him to convince her otherwise. Everything in her is demanding no, but she doesn't want to be separated, and if Jon tried to sway her, she'd likely concede.

Thankfully, he knows it too. The merits of keeping him with them are not worth the risks. "Aye," he sighs. "If we're certain he can be kept safely here, guarded, then we must leave him behind."

It breaks her heart. But she sees the Night King in her dreams, in her memory, and every bit of her body and soul tells her to keep Jaeh a world away.

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Daenerys sails to Winterfell to gather their forces and fortify. The first line of major defense past the Wall. The major stronghold, where the most important battles will be waged out of. She takes everyone she needs, everyone of use in this campaign, while Jhiqui and Kovarro remain on Dragonstone with their son. A contingent of Unsullied strong enough to hold up under a siege. Surrounded by protectors, where he's safe from harm. Rhaegal to watch over him. Plans in place to sail east to Essos with him and the dragon if the war doesn't go their way.

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On the voyage north, their last night on the ship before White Harbor, she comes to his cabin after everyone has gone to sleep. She knocks, he opens the door, sees the look on her face, and steps back, urging her in. She passes him and he closes the door. He turns, she turns, and they get stuck for a moment, staring at each other. There are a thousand things to be said, but also nothing needed at all.

Dany doesn't say a word. She stands before him, no mask, everything in her eyes, and she starts undressing. His fingers furl into his palms as he watches her. Leaving Jaeh for the foreseeable future has hit her too hard. She's been hurting. Withdrawn. Coming to him now for solace, he knows, not needing her to explain. It's what he's wanted, to comfort her, to comfort himself, yet he hesitates, just a little wary. When she's standing bare and vulnerable, he takes in a steadying breath and crosses the distance.

Fingers unfurling, he raises his hands to her face, hovers there for a second, just shy of contact. He skims them down her shoulders, her collarbone, the shape of her sides, the flare of her hips, never touching. Not until he leans in and catches her mouth. Steals her breath for himself. Then his hands take hold of her hips and walk her slowly backward to reach the bed.

She tugs his tunic over his head and he kicks off his boots, stumbling into her, tangling with her as they go down. She digs her knee into his hip and flips them, coming astride his chest, working at the laces of his trousers. He covers her knuckles, stilling her, then runs his hands up from her knees, fingers curving over her thighs. He thinks about flipping her back beneath him, pinning her down, but he brushes the impulse aside as a better idea strikes him.

Jon urges her knees a little more outward and digs himself lower down the bed until he can arch into her, getting his mouth on her. The first stroke of his tongue and she shudders, a strangled sound in her throat, coiling taut, her spine bowing, head falling back. He jerks his chin, scraping his beard against her, and she cries out.

This goes on for a good long while.

When she's wrecked, shivering and gasping and whining, he grips her hip and turns her sideways, letting her drop boneless to the bed, following her over. He drags his teeth against her hipbone, lips
marking across her as he goes upwards, as she murmurs his name under her panting breath, uneven and choked with emotion, over and over. The next time she starts for his laces, she's impatient, needy, urgent, ripping at them, sucking on his tongue.

Dany doesn't settle until he pushes into her, bucking up under him, twisting her hips to take him deeper. Her fingertips dig into his back and her kisses cross slowly from his jaw to his throat to his scarred shoulder and back again. He plants a hand to the pillow at her ear to help hold himself, to gain leverage to thrust harder, and his thumb stretches to rub her cheek, smearing the wetness there.

As he gets close, as control begins to slip and his rhythm gets erratic and rough, he drops his head into the crook of her neck, buries his nose there with a groan.

"Jon," she gasps, and it's a shaky vibration in her chest, a distraught plea.

"It's gonna be alright," he murmurs into her skin, promising something he can't possibly promise her. "It's alright, beloved."

"I've led many men to their deaths," he says suddenly, drawing from his thoughts with a conscious effort to connect with her. To give her the uglier pieces of himself as she asked. To show her somehow that he was so ready once to condemn her actions because he condemned his own, justified or not. As if she could be a reflection of himself. "None more than the ones I got killed the day we retook Winterfell."

Dany moves against him, sliding on top of him from the side. She settles herself between his legs, her breasts flattened on his stomach, her chin on her hands when they rest on his chest, looking up at him with clear eyes, listening.

He traces his fingers through her unkempt tresses, sifting strands between them, drawing patterns on her slick back. Using the motion to center himself.

"I'd been warned, I knew better, and yet when that son of a bitch cut my kid brother loose, I couldn't stop myself. Rickon was running toward me and I just couldn't not come for him. I broke rank and rode on my own into the middle of the open field. I was half a second away from reaching him. A half second and I could've caught his hand. I could've saved him. Instead, the arrows went through his chest and he fell at my horse's hooves. I was alone in the middle of that field, exposed, and I charged for a fucking cavalry of six thousand men. And because of that, because of me, because I couldn't control my emotions, my men were forced to follow. I stole what sliver of advantage they'd had and I got them slaughtered. Thousands of men. For nothing. Rickon was as dead as he would've been if I'd waited."

She takes awhile to absorb that, letting the silence stretch, letting him feel what he's feeling until he can push it down again. Until he can ease the intensity of it. When she finally chooses her words, she's soft and calm and matter of fact. She says, "It was your brother." Just that simply. And then, "It's not fair. It makes no difference. But anyone else would have done the same."

"Would you?" he challenges. Wonders.

"For my brother? No." What she has in her eyes now dries his throat. It tightens his chest. It sets his blood on fire. "For my son, yes, in a heartbeat. For you, yes."

"That's our failings."

"Yes."
"I don't want you to do that. I don't want men dying for me."

"I don't want men to die for me," she tells him, "but they will. It's inescapable."

That's why he never wanted to be king or commander. He feels he must, he's driven to, but he doesn't want to lead the charge. He doesn't want millions of lives in his hands, living or dying by his choices. His mistakes. He doesn't want the power to send them to their deaths to save his family.

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"What do we say, when they ask questions?" he wonders. "I won't lie to my lords, but I'm unsure just how honest I should be about all this."

"About our involvement?"

"That too."

"Say that you've sworn yourself to me, as I've sworn myself to you. Our kingdoms, our people, we've all come together to survive the winter. When it's over, we may go our separate ways, but continue to coexist beneficially. For now, that is true enough. Will that suffice?"

"I think no matter what I say, they won't be happy. But aye, that's the best way we could possibly put it."

"It's the truth," she assures.

"Of a sort, I suppose."

"Yes, but the truth," she reiterates, moving to prop up on her elbow, to look down at him with a serious expression. A devoted expression. "However we come out of this at Dawn, it could be that way, if you want it that way. If you want to be King in the North and keep your independence, then we shall live as neighbors. Our hearts and our kingdoms are separate things, Jon. You and I as man and woman, as mother and father to Jaehaerys, that doesn't have to be tied to you and I as king and queen. I will not force you to submit. I was never committed to otherwise. A few of the Free Cities and the Iron Islands have done as much. Depending on the state of Westeros when this is over, others may follow suit. Dorne most likely will secede. United by the Stormborn Coalition, but sovereign still."

Would she let all of the Seven Kingdoms break apart to independence if they asked well enough? All this conquest and she could willingly come out at the end of it queen of nothing but her Bay of Dragons.

He can envision that surprisingly easily. As easily as the alternative. He can see her ruling the world. And he can see her seizing back her family's rightful claim to the Seven Kingdoms just to turn around and unravel their legacy.

She's a strange one.

After a thoughtful moment, knuckles drifting up and down the dip of her spine, he very cautiously questions, "And if not? If I have no desire to live as your neighbor?"

Dany takes awhile, searching his face, then she swallows and shifts, laying her head back to his shoulder so he can't see her. "Then you could be my king. In the North, in the south, in the east and west. Wherever you go."
It's not shocking. She's said somewhat similar, something to give him the vague idea. *I want you by my side.* He still finds himself floored when she says it. Given the arrangement of the circumstances so far, he's been forced into an inevitably passive role. It's been both a frustration and a relief, a respite from his world in the North. But it means that, whether she'd agree or not, he can't help but feel he's done nothing to prove his worthiness of all that to her. Yet.

"I don't wanna be any king," he confesses. His fingers rise to tangle in her hair. "But if I had to be, I'd wanna be yours."

All the lords and ladies of the Riverlands, the Vale, and the North have been summoned by his sister ahead of them. They gather to greet them at the gates, to accost their king before his guests have a chance to settle. He puts them off as long as he can justify, focusing on the reunion, trying to steel himself.

What's left of the Stark children come together in their father's study. Sansa to Arya, Arya to Bran, Bran to Jon, they reach for each other. They reacquaint. A bittersweet relief, sadness hanging heavy in the air. Later, when the younger two leave the room, there are conversations that must be had between the king and his regent. Things she couldn't explain by raven, things he missed, what must be done now.

Also, "Why is Lord Royce warden of the Vale?"

"Lord Baelish has fled the North," Sansa says, shortly, coolly. "When Bran returned, he exposed his treasons. I ordered Lady Brienne to execute him, but he'd gone."

"His treasons?"

"He was behind it all, Jon. From the beginning, Father's death, the War of the Five Kings, he orchestrated everything. He set it into motion."

"Any word where he headed?"

"No. It's a shame. I would've preferred to give him the same treatment I gave Ramsay," she says, still shortly, still cool, her pale face unexpressive. With this grown Sansa, it's hard to tell how she's really feeling, what she's really thinking. Is she troubled by her choices? Or is she satisfied? Comforted? Is she afraid of Littlefinger?

Jon should've killed him when he had the chance. When he had the nerve to actually tell him he *loved her* before their father's epitaph.

There is so much more to tell her. To explain. But they run out of time. When he thinks to begin his story, she pushes ahead with political talk. She warns him of which lords are closer to turning against him, which are only voicing dissatisfaction but unlikely to take action, and which he can expect support from. She offers him ways to coax the unhappy ones to his side. He listens to everything she has to say, but he already feels frustration at the thought. He has not come home with the greatest host there's ever been in history just to waste time ingratiating himself to foolish men.

Yet they move to the great hall and he stands before the overpacked benches with exactly that intention.

"Back to the cold," Daenerys sighs, watching her breath mist into the rest of the whiteness all around
her. She's been all over the world, seen so many different terrains and weathers and landscapes. She's never despised a land so much as she despises this winter. These wastelands of snow and ice and sleet and fog. The coldness that seeps into her bones and makes her body ache. The stiffness it causes. The sharpness of the breath in her lungs. And she's somewhat immune to it. She can't imagine how all her people are faring. What it feels like for them, if it's this awful to her.

Great fires have been built and stoked and are being tended to everywhere she turns as they ride the muddy slush of the road through Winter Town.

With so many poorer northerners already sent south, keeps opened up all along the Kingsroad for them, there should've been room in the structures of this settlement to house at least fifteen thousand men. Instead, so much has been burned away or buried under blizzards in recent years that it hardly fits ten thousand. The Mother's Men have been helping the northerners at clearing and rebuilding, but it's not nearly enough. Her Unsullied half fill it up alone.

Overseeing the arrival of troops is a grim thing. Her court is struggling to scramble enough provisions together for them all. A good portion will march on, contingents to garrison at keeps farther north, like Last Hearth and Karhold. More still will go to reinforce the Wall. She's kept her khalasar at the Crossing, manning the deserted seat of House Frey, near enough to ride north to meet them at short notice, but not so close that they're subjected to weathering tents in a tundra, eating up precious supplies around Winterfell. And yet some of the men she'd planned to have here with her will need to be diverted and welcomed in at Hornwood or Torrhen's Square instead.

She's riding through the tight rows of restored housing with Grey Worm on one side of her mare and Missandei on the other, Ghost stalking along nearby, disappearing into the snow until he bounds around again.

Her desert friends must be more miserable here than she, having had less exposure to such bitter freeze, having no fire in their blood to combat it, but they take it better. Or they don't show it. Missandei is bundled up so high, it threatens to make Daenerys laugh, watching her huddle into herself and try not to shiver. Grey Worm has his leathers and a fur that was foisted on him, but he allows no sign of discomfort. His austere glare scans their scenery, just as concerned as she is with what they're seeing today.

It took long enough to accumulate the necessary garb for so many summer men to survive the snow before she could move them north. So many hundreds of thousands of horses that needed reshoeing. A million furs and winter boots and armor adjusted for the new clime. Too few of their armies are prepared to encamp. And that's not even considering the problems arising with moving food at such mass scale.

There's not enough to hunt in all the continent to feed so many and the progression of winter and the after affects of war have dwindled crops. Add to that the riotous Narrow Sea slowing down Essosi merchants, it's a problem that grows more dire every day, not less.

"How long will what we have go until it's all run out?" she questions. "Will it last us until the next delivery from White Harbor?"

Missandei says, "The supply train from the Reach will make it before anything out of White Harbor. They're being hit with another sea storm. The waves have swelled up and washed out the docks and the town too close to their waters."

She turns to her, startled. "When did this happen?"

"The raven only came before we rode out."
"And the estimations on what we have now?"

"A moon at best, if the men ration."

"Let's hope the supply train suffers no delay."

Jon is sick of the dissent from his lords before they even get started, Northmen and Vale and Riverlanders feeling more entitled than the rest of Westeros, thinking their king has more sway over the conquering queen so they don't have the same constraints. He told himself he would be cautious. Diplomatic. He tries to remember Sansa's advice. But when he's faced with the hall full of angry men, grumbling and sneering and shouting, he forgets why he'd intended any of that. As he has tendency to when faced with these particular leadership conflicts, his temper gets the better of him. His impatience. She's not in the room, so they feel too freely with their hostile tongues. After not long, he bristles. It all fills his ears, resentful dismissal, illogical spite, the slurs.

Shock reverberates into the sudden quiet when he surges to his feet and hammers a fist on the table to shut them up.

"That's enough," he growls. "You will not disrespect her under this roof. She has come with the full weight of the world's might behind her to save us and you sit here bickering and dishonoring her. You, men that have no leg to stand on, half of whom slammed your doors in my face when we needed our banners to save our home. To get us all out from under Bolton boot heels."

He may doubt her sometimes, but outsiders will not. He could doubt her, because even when he once feared she was a dangerous stranger, he knew she was safe from him. He knew he would never truly go against her. They do not have that security. They do not get to sling mud at the woman that's come to save them.

They put forth more of their slander, about her conquests, about her intentions, about her savages raping and slaughtering their women and her dragons burning their lands and her armies pushing them out of their own castles and just more of the same. Always the same. He won't hear it. He's come too far. He won't go backward. They've fought their way through so much and are so very close to entering this final fight with a good chance at triumphing.

"War is hell," Jon says. "She's done horrible things waging it. So has every man that's ever gone to war, and they've all done so for far lesser reasons than our queen." And as the uproar begins, he goes on louder, harder, "Aye, our queen. Yet no one calls them mad or monsters. She uses her dragons to win quickly. That's worse somehow, you say, using the dragons, as if they cause more destruction or cross some line. But dead is dead. And if she didn't use her dragons, the fighting would continue, and thousands more would die in battle instead." He pauses, takes a sobering breath, bearing the brunt of their ire as he has a hundred times before, here and up north. "She has a leash on her dragons and her Dothraki. They are no longer raiders. She won't allow it. They are her warriors, just as the Unsullied and the freedmen of Essos and now every southern kingdom in Westeros."

"Exactly! She's wrought her bloodlust and greed for power over the whole rest of the world and you just wanna roll over and give her the North as well?!"

"None of you know her. And none of you know what we face Beyond the Wall, because you have to see it to know. You've proven with your squabbling that you don't understand what I've been trying to explain to you. Before her? We were going to die. Every last one of us. We were going to die up here in our beloved North in our snow and there was going to be nothing to stand in their way going south. She changed all that. She's given us a fighting fucking chance. So we are going to put
aside our enmities and our pride and we are going to welcome all those foreign savages and southerners with open arms. Because we will be fighting side by side with them for all our lives. Many of them will die, for us, because don't think for one second that she wouldn't be better off packing up her armies and her dragons and her armada and building them an empire in the east. So we will not scorn them or treat them as lesser men."

He looks back to Sansa for support, to remind himself, to compose himself, searching for inspiration. An eloquence he always lacks when he needs it most. She's staring up at him with an odd look in her eyes, nothing like the disapproval or exasperation he'd expected from her. She seems … moved.

Bolstered by that, he turns back to the hall and he promises them, "Daenerys Targaryen may not be the queen you want but she's the queen we all need."

"So you have bent the knee," Lyanna Mormont cuts into the stormy silence, cold, hard, accusing.

"I've not bent. I will not bend."

"Then what do you call it?"

"I've sworn myself to her. As she's sworn herself to us."

They haven't really discussed the particulars of that. He'd been preoccupied, and she hadn't brought it up again, and what does it matter when they're in this fight together? Her Dothraki have guarded him as they would her nearly from the beginning. Her people have shown him respect and deference in a way they would not had their queen not encouraged them to. She calls him king. She values his support. But the lines are not drawn strictly. She speaks casually of radical ways he can't quite figure out how to implement. As with everything she does, Dany has no worry about the way things normally work or what tradition might demand of her.

In this, he trusts her.

She's never dictated the decisions he makes for his own kingdoms. She's never undermined his authority when it comes to the North.

True, she wielded her power to keep him on the island when he wanted to cross the Wall, but that was in her court, an expedition that would've been for her campaign, and she had every right to deny it. If she hadn't, she would've gone north after him and her dragon might've died anyway. Or he might've died instead. Or Arya would've perished because they wouldn't have been there to receive Bran's warning. As they'd seen with Cersei in the Dragonpit, it still would've been for nothing. And all of that is discounting the fact that her decision was a personal one.

He can't blame her for it.

If he'd been in her place, if it had been Dany wanting to go north without him, to hunt for Others, he would've done anything he could to stop her.

Gods, he very well might've been weak enough to have tied her up and thrown her on a ship and sailed away with her.

"I've not formally surrendered the northern kingdoms," he tells them, "but we will not secede them from her."

"We?" the formidable little girl challenges again.

"Aye, we. You are all of course free to crown yourselves a new king and face the Dragon Queen on
your own. But I will be doing everything in my power to keep focus on our true enemy, together with our best chance at surviving."

"A child," Sansa says when she's told, staring out over the white snow in shock. Grim shock that refuses to turn to the excitement Arya had exuded. "A child, Jon? Really? With Daenerys Targaryen?" She seems more exasperated than happy for him. "Tell me you at least married in secret or something. Tell me you've not fathered a bastard with the queen."

"So you disapprove," he jokes weakly, trying to steer himself away from the onslaught of guilt and regret and shame and all the other unpleasant feelings and dark thoughts he works so hard to keep at bay.

It was easier when he could hold Jaeh in his arms and see his smile and be certain that none of it makes a lick of real difference, not there on Dragonstone with Dany and his son and all her people, where nobody cared.

"You couldn't have broken your vows with someone safer?"

"She's a good person, Sansa. She's a good queen."

"Look at what she's done," she argues, and finally the alarm she's been stewing in reveals itself. "She's more Targaryen than Targaryens have been for centuries!"

"I told you before, she's not what they say. She's not Aegon come again. Aegon The Conqueror killed brutally without compassion. He slaughtered when it was unnecessary. He brought great Houses to extinction, lords with their lowborn alike. He offered no choice to the innocents caught in the crossfire. He did it for glory and power, pure and simple, for his power. Not for betterment. Not for Dawn."

"Jon, I know you want to believe that—"

"She's not just Targaryen," he swears strongly. Fervently. "She's something else. Something brand new. She makes monsters wish they'd never been born. And that is exactly what we need now."
It's Bran who breaks them.

He's her brother's son. Rhaegar and Lyanna Stark. He's not a bastard. He's never been a bastard. He's a Targaryen. He's the rightful heir to the throne. He's blood of the dragon and not some watered down descendant. Dragon and wolf. Ice and fire.

Daenerys is stunned, but she is not surprised. Her first thought as the words filter in is, Of course. Of course you are. Now it makes sense.

She doesn't know what to feel first. Joy, relief, betrayal, shame? Insecurity? He withdraws from them all at the revelation. He withdraws from her. She imagines his whole world is rocked. His past, his sense of self, his certainty about the future. She'd like to help him, she would, but she's barely holding herself together. She doubts she has it in her to console anyone else. Let alone Jon, when things are so complicated between them now, and when he would likely refuse her anyway.

Targaryens do what Targaryens do. She grew up knowing that, understanding why, conditioned to feel normal about it. But Starks… Starks don't do that. Starks don't bear children with each other.

They keep it quiet. He doesn't want anyone to know. It would cause too much upheaval when they need to be unified and on task. He worries who would turn against him at the revelation. He worries how it would divide loyalties between them in dangerous ways. She worries about that too.

But personally, emotionally, she finds herself overjoyed at the truth. That she's not the last of her House anymore. That she's not alone under the burden of preserving her family's legacy. All the things she'd been sure of, all the things she'd decided, this only confirms them for her. This feels like destiny.

Like she's back in the desert, standing in the ashes of her husband's pyre with three baby dragons sinking their talons into her unburnt flesh.

She regrets that what is wondrous to her is something that troubles Jon so much. He's not hidden well that he doesn't think highly of Targaryens. Or if not himself, at least his people. He'd prided himself on being a Stark, even without their name. He'd built who he is as a man around who he thought his father would want him to be. A father that is not his father, as it turns out. A man lauded for honor and honesty who spent his entire life living the greatest lie.

Daenerys never imagined she'd owe Ned Stark all her happiness.

In private counsel, looking to solely her interests as her Spider should, Varys tells her very delicately, "There is an argument which could be made, should one choose to pursue it, that Prince Rhaegar's progeny were disinherited when King Aerys removed his firstborn son from the line of succession, decreeing his second son heir when he sent him and his mother to Dragonstone after the Trident, suspecting a Dornish betrayal. It's why he kept Princess Elia and her children in the capital, for hostage. If it could be proven, there would be no question, since you were heir to Viserys—"

"Don't concern yourself, Lord Varys. That is no argument that needs making." Even if she was willing to fight Jon for the throne, he doesn't want it. He doesn't want the one he has, never mind all
of Westeros. "We are far beyond arguing over unclear claims or old laws. And if we weren't, it would be military might that would decide."

Might and will, just as everything else she's accomplished has come down to. Not primogeniture, when those same misguided laws would relegate her secondary in all things simply because she was born a woman. No, she doesn't care who has a stronger claim to the Seven Kingdoms. She's grown far past that thinking. Her ancestors had no claims. She had no claim to any part of Essos. She believes by this point without doubt that they are in this together, she and Jon, and if they weren't…

"He would not make a bad king on his own."

Kings are meant for justice. Kings are made to protect the weak.

She believes he has that in him. She knows he has greatness in him.

She wagered everything she's built on that the day she decided to name him her successor and entrust all that matters to him when she dies. She wagered that he will rise to the challenge, just as he's risen to every challenge that's confronted him so far. When she dies, if she falls in this, she has faith in him to do what she could not see through to the end. To save the world, to care for their people as he would his own children like she tries to, to raise their child true. It's a lot to ask. It would be too much to ask of anyone else.

Jon is different.

So many years, she's worked to reclaim Westeros. To be queen. Nothing has changed that. She will never truly surrender. And yet, she finds herself wondering, if it came to that, would she actually mind bending the knee to Jon Snow? It's hard to acknowledge simply because of what she's been forced to hold so tightly to against everyone seeking to keep it from her, and destroy her for it, but it's a thought she must entertain now. As it settles in, she realizes that…

No. She wouldn't mind.

It almost feels sacrosanct to admit to herself.

But it's purely theoretical.

She focuses on the campaign. On what matters. War strategy, corralling their motley troops, checking the chaos erupting every day, the infighting, the problems with shipments and loss of grain and lagging construction and distribution of the necessary weapons to arm their soldiers. For weeks, all she sees of Jon is around the war table with their councils. Sometimes, she glimpses him going into the Godswood from her balcony, Ghost trailing after him, or she'll see him across a courtyard with one of his sisters, each always preoccupied.

She's never looking at him when she feels the weight of his eyes on her, the press of that troubled stare into her skin. She never turns. If he wants to keep himself from her, she won't make it harder for him.

He must decide on his own what he chooses.

As for her, well, she can't help how the truth convinces her ever further that he was made for her. Just as she was meant for him. How could he not be her only match?

He had no intention of pushing her away. It just happened. He was swallowed up in his head,
everything he knew, everything a lie.

He's lived his life under the humiliation of being a bastard. And he never was. His sisters, his brother, they're not. No, cousins instead. Lady Catelyn despised him because he represented her husband's indiscretion, when her husband was never unfaithful, when she might've been kind to him and let him stay in Winterfell with Robb rather than chase him off in exile to the Wall if she'd known the truth. Father… No, Lord Eddard. It eats at him. Every conversation he'd ever had with the man, every time he'd asked of his mother. He always suspected she was dead, or ashamed and never wanted him. Now he knows.

Still a dead mother he never knew, but he wasn't her shame. He hopes not at least. He hopes Bran is right and she was happy and in love.

But it also occurs to him that he's either the consequence or a cause of the rebellion that tore Westeros apart, to which it never really recovered all these years later. That tore Dany's family apart, sent her off to her exiled life and all the suffering she'd endure over it. He has a thousand things to think about, some of which inevitably come around to what he was created out of. The strife and the devastation and the tragedy that was born from a selfish prince and a fearless girl too young. It occurs to him that if the prince hadn't abandoned his wife, or maybe just if the two hadn't fled without a word, allowing the kingdoms to believe her stolen, none of what came after would have happened.

How much better off could the world be if Jon had never been born?

Would Dany have grown up a sheltered princess? Would his siblings still be intact and unharmed in Winterfell?

But no. He has to shake that away. He doesn't wanna go down that road. He won't do that to himself. Besides, if he hadn't been north, who would warn the world of what's coming? Who would've prepared them for the Long Night?

His existence is important, he tells himself. Maybe it's Dany's doing that he can now go so quickly to that, so quickly away from the road he's walked all his life, feeling pointless, feeling imprisoned, feeling like a burden. She has so much faith in herself and the changes in the world she causes. Maybe it's rubbed off on him.

The symmetry doesn't escape his notice either. It's rather poetic. After all, it was the ill advised love of a dragon and a wolf that wrecked Westeros all those years ago. Now it will be a dragon and a wolf coming together once more that reunites it. He's committed to that belief. He's determined it will be.

"Jon, you are the heir to the Iron Throne," his brother had declared, more than once now, and he'd just laughed. Whoever his father was, it's a laughable thought. But heir or not, whatever thrones they do or don't sit on, he's more certain than ever…

Dany is a queen. She may say she wants a small home and a simple life, but he knows her better. She's a queen through and through. His queen. Which means he'll have to be a king, now and always. He means to stand at her side, come what may. She's a queen that wants to lead the world into a better place, so he must make himself into a great king. He will fight all her battles if she lets him. He will bear her weights for her. He will learn how to give her people, their people, everything she's so fervent that they deserve. And he will crush those that make themselves their enemy.

So aye, he's a fucking king.

Yet it takes days before he can commit to the words he'd once told Theon Greyjoy, to what he knew
in his head but was difficult to come to terms with.

*You don't have to choose. You are both.*

Jon is still his father's son, a Stark, a wolf, Rhaegar Targaryen or no.

He also had no intention of Dany ever questioning that he'd look elsewhere from her, under any circumstances. Yet somehow he finds himself with a queen acting almost as childish and jealous as he'd been fool to on Dragonstone.

It's the wildling girl that does it.

"King Crow," she'd whispered, and he'd jerked out of his nightmares into a dark room and deep confusion, her body slipping under the furs beside him after she pulled her dress over her head and tossed it aside with a brash smile.

"Huh?" he'd panted, still disoriented, and then her hands were on him before he could catch up. And her mouth. A grunt in his throat, going rigid, confusion turning to panic. It'd taken him a minute to grab her wrists and swing upright from under her, setting the girl gently to her feet on the cold oak.

Apparently, something he hadn't thought of, he's a good suitor these days. He'd known the northern lords were pushing their daughters at him, those brave enough to ignore the obvious, that he already belongs to the Dragon Queen. But he hadn't realized the Free Folk saw the same. That they'd all seen what he'd done for them at Hardhome, that they'd heard what he's done for them since, giving them passage, lending them shelter, protecting them. It's led to some of their women thinking they should snatch him up.

That turn of events leaves him feeling like a boy again, too slow to understand that Ygritte truly wanted him for some reason until she'd stripped naked and kissed him. And then it leaves him feeling impatient, exasperated, because what does bedding kings matter while they face winter?

Whoever saw her coming out of his rooms, whoever just had to make sure the queen heard as much, he'd like to get his hands on that whoever.

He lingers after the next council meeting, trying to speak to her privately. When she gets up and walks out before the last of their court is gone, pointedly avoiding him, he exhales a harsh breath and chases after her. Corners her in a dark stone corridor before she can disappear.

It's an awkward thing to explain and he knows he sounds suspect saying this was all through no fault of his own. Maybe if he hadn't avoided her after Bran and Sam's confession, she wouldn't have given it a second thought. But now, he's not so sure.

Jon's not at his best with his words, not very good at expressing himself under pressure obviously, though he's been working on it. But she seems to believe him. In fact, she seems oddly disappointed when he's done talking. Then the disappointment turns to irritation. She says, "You couldn't have honestly thought I assumed you took another woman into your bed. Jon, please."

"Then why are you mad?"

"Your Westerosi girls are cruel gossips, and they seem to enjoy being particularly petty with me. I don't find it pleasurable, hearing these stories. You'll have to excuse me if I'm in an unflattering mood."
Her answer is brisk and dismissive, moving past him before he can pursue any other topic when her Dornish advisor beckons her around a corner.

And then the wildling approaches him again, brash again, blatantly flirting, right out in front of everyone passing through the courtyard. There's nothing on Dany's face as she watches him try to gently get away, standing on the second level, hands falling to the rail, Arya beside her smirking. Anyone that didn't know her would think she's perfectly fine. Passionless. Right up to the point that Drogon drops from the sky, landing in the snow so hard that the frozen earth cracks a little, and everyone nearby is thrown off their feet. Dozens of people duck in panic beneath his behemoth size, narrowly avoiding his paws.

The dragon snarls and Dany's perfect face shatters with a sudden expression of shock and sheepishness, bright eyes wide at his arrival. At his territorial show. Embarrassment colors her cheeks in the cold.

She barks something stern to the beast in Valyrian and his wings whip to lift him, blowing everyone to the ground again under a battering gust of icy wind. The queen tips her chin up with immense dignity to all who look to her then, but she turns and flees as fast as she can without outright running.

Jon should feel concerned, maybe unjustifiably guilty, but instead there's a strange guttural thrill beating through him, heating his blood. He grins after her, moves to follow. He feels the same way he'd felt when she'd landed in Castle Black and turned her wrath onto his traitorous black brothers. It makes no sense. He feels proud.

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That night, he finds her on the battlements overlooking Winterfell, standing under a slow downfall of snowflakes, dusted in them, holding herself against the chill. She looks out to the burning flames in the blackness. And behind her, above her, Drogon lays on the uneven stones of a tower and walkway eaves, his massive body spilled awkwardly across them, trying to be close to his mother, trying to rest.

Jon spares him an uneasy look, wondering if he should be worried about roofs collapsing under his weight. The stone is strong, but how strong? It's not as if he can exactly shoo him away.

Except for those times she sought him out, vulnerable, asking for comfort and connection, she's been somewhat closed to him, to everyone. Lost in her grief and dread and fear, in her longing for Jaehaerys and her mourning for Viserion. She's been focused madly on being only Queen Daenerys, in that way she does, forgetting the resolve she'd made to let him in, let him share the burden. Forgetting because he forgot, because he pushed her away.

He's learned that to draw her out, she needs to be given someone else to focus on. So he comes to stand at her side, looking over the darkness as she does. He begins, "I grew up knowing I had no place here, that I didn't belong, no matter what Robb or Arya would say. Every meal in the great hall, I would sit down below, off to the side, hidden in the back where the bastard should be, and I'd look up at all my family seated around the grand Stark table and I'd wish I was with them. The day I left for the Wall, I was sure I'd never see home again. When I was a boy, I pretended I didn't, but I'd wish I'd been born into Robb's role, so that I could stay and become Lord of Winterfell. Now it has come about in the worst way imaginable."

"But it was what you were meant for."

"No." He turns to her and reveals, "Now I know why I never belonged here. I was never supposed to be in Winterfell. I should've been with you."
"I do wonder what my life would've been if Ned Stark hadn't taken you. If they'd sent you to Essos to be with us. I wonder what Viserys would've been if he'd known he would never be king. I wonder how easier it would've been for me, with you beside us, with you to protect me as a brother should, as a good man would. But then I worry who you would be if Ned Stark hadn't raised you. Would the entitlement and the exile have changed you as it did Viserys? Would he have corrupted you?"

"No matter who raised me, I would never be the man your brother was."

"I believe so," she assures with a small fond smile. "I'm glad I'm not the last dragon, Jon. But I'm glad you're a wolf. If you'd been with me, I would've been happier then, but we might still be dragons in the desert, in exile. You wouldn't have your family. You wouldn't be a pack."

There's something he wants to say, to declare, he feels, but whatever it is gets caught in his chest. Intense staring, wistfulness, regret, and happiness despite everything around them. Longing to bridge the gap that keeps coming back.

Maybe this isn't the right time. Maybe she still needs space to grieve or adjust. He puts the sternness back on his face and starts to reluctantly turn away. To give it to her. Yet before he's turned, she rolls her eyes, grabs the bulk of his coat and tugs him back to her, to meet her mouth, like their first kiss. His hands go quick to her face, catching her, fingers sinking in between her braids.

He's blood of the dragon.

It's a strange thought. He doesn't feel like a dragon. He feels like a wolf, bound too closely with Ghost, the North, too closely to the ice. The fire comes from her, not him. It'll never come from him. It's always Dany that breathes fire into him.

"Does this mean I should be asking you to bend the knee?" he teases that night, expression still stern, no hint of it in his tone. Opening an interesting door, one he's not sure he wants to take on, but he's feeling adventurous tonight, emboldened by the happiness and the heat she's stoked.

The queen tilts her head, devious glint in her eyes, dangerous curve to her smile. She's naked and flushed, a sheen on her skin, silver hair loose and mussed. "Like this, my lord?" She lowers to her knees on the cold oak before him. Licks her lips slowly, purposefully, a challenge there.

Jon swallows hard, trying to remember the game. "King."

"Sorry," she breathes, not sorry at all. "My king."

Daenerys Targaryen bows to no man. She's fought too long, too hard, to ever relinquish her mission or her autonomy. To let any man take her reign and stop her from remaking this world. They both know it. She's testing him. Or only teasing…

There's an edge of something more in the air, either way, if they both together don't choose to ignore it.

He gets down on his knees with her. Kisses her like his life depends on it.

Time passes at Winterfell. Winter grows harsher. Food grows scarcer. There've been no attacks at the Wall, no sightings at all, but blizzards have been damaging their weaponry. Trebuchets broken,
crow's nests crumbling off the edge under the force of the winds, trying to rebuild as fast as the
damage is wrought. Scouts find ravaged caverns in the desolate stretches, small rough passages
things like direwolves and dead men might crawl through. It means they're in more trouble than they
realized. It means the magic of the Wall is already failing.

House Redwyne, who has the strongest fleet of Westeros and had opted to stay neutral in the fight
for the crown, is not yet in open rebellion of their new queen, but are quietly making moves, her
Spider tells her. Them on their southerly island Arbor.

Company of the Rose, sellswords founded long ago by Northmen that'd rather become exiles than
bow to a Targaryen, sees a resurgence when Daenerys moves north. Some of those northerners
pushed south by the king and queen in the war efforts have instead decided to sail east and abandon
their roots, if not outright take up against the throne. Bastards and foreign whores pushing them off
their lands for no good reason, as they see it.

No word has come after all this time from Captain Rivers or the Golden Company and they cannot
determine where the force has gone.

Meanwhile, the Ghiscari legions in central Essos are rebelling, her Spider says, and the Free Cities
armies are clashing against them in her name, recruited by the rallying of the Bay of Dragons.

Wanting to help her people in Essos, she's torn by staying, being required here, unable to go to them
in their plight, forced to have faith that the Stormborn Coalition has the tools they need to rely on
themselves through this. But it isn't easy.

When her resolve starts to weaken, she turns to him in her frustration, needing the reminder. "I
cannot abandon any people I've promised to protect. I said I would take care of them. They're mine.
They're all my children."

"You take on too much," Jon tells her. "You can't be mother to the whole world."

"I can try."

The allied king and queen grow better at working together, perfecting through trial and error, under
the great stress of the circumstances. And by on occasion ignoring the advice of their respective
courts, because so far, when it comes to each other, they have not all guided them well.

Crownlands and Westerlands and Reacher lords disrespect the King in the North, as a bastard, as a
northern roughneck, as an oathbreaker who they say forsook the Night's Watch, and Daenerys cuts
them down brutally into their place for it. It never happens again, not where the queen can hear. His
northern kingdoms mostly fall in line behind their king, but the ones that don't aren't met with
forgiveness when they try stirring up discontent behind their backs.

Highborns spend a lot of time insulting her, some more discreetly than others. She's unbothered, has
always greeted slurs to her with a mocking smile and a cool return, and now shall be no different.
But it grates on Jon. She can't get too impatient with him. When they talk against him, she feels the
same heat flare up and lash out. Irrational and unnecessary, but it is an instinct hard to resist for them
both.

Jon is a man that respects the hell out of her in every way, he and his Hand and his sisters have
expressed to her as much, in their varying ways. But he's a man of his roots, which took time to
move beyond, time and exposure over the years to worlds of a different view. Northmen respect
strong women, so they should grow to see the same of her, he insists. But Daenerys knows better.
Even those few that welcome female warriors aren't exempt from such a phenomena. Respecting
women who fight, having no problems with girls learning to protect themselves, is not remotely the same thing as men being comfortable with a woman in power. Let alone a woman with absolute power and in complete control without checks or balances.

They will not be won over by her, she comes to realize. They will only grow to resent her more.

It doesn’t matter to her. She has what she needs.

When Jon feels strongly about something, Daenerys follows his lead. When other things escape his concern, she picks up the slack. When she’s overpowered by her impulsiveness or starts to fall into old habits of going alone, disregarding everyone around her, he pulls her back to where she wants to be. She does the same for him. They learn bit by bit how to avoid exacerbating each other's inferiorities, and they start tempering each other. When one needs to be held back, talked sense to, that's what the other does. When one needs to be held up, supported, their faith restored, that's what the other does.

It's taken a long time, through a lot of unpleasant struggles, their mettle tested like the steel under a smith, trying together to cobble a mismatched empire of fighters and survivors as everything around them goes wrong.

Every so often, Jon and Daenerys will slip away from their duties and Drogon will fly them south to Dragonstone to be with Jaeh. The increasing volatility of the weather begins to make those chances rarer and rarer. He seems to be doing well with Jhiqui and Kvarro, and the village of freedmen that remain with him, but they're missing so much. Every week they're away from him, he changes again. Grows a little bit more. It breaks her heart.

It gives her such a horribly acute understanding of the mistake she made, keeping him from Jon in the beginning. She'd understood before, she'd felt awful, but she hadn't really felt for herself just how much it made a difference.

She doesn't know how he ever stopped hating her for that. He's a better person than she would've been, if it'd been her.

Eventually, Jon has to start physically dragging her back to Drogon when the time comes to leave, and he only does so because she'd won the many arguments they'd had that she should stay. She shouldn't be in a warzone either, he'd insisted. She should be with their son. At least one of them should be with their son. But she's needed. She won't leave him alone in this war, bearing the weight of the decisions that must be made on his own.

He's hunched over the desk when she's finally able to return to his rooms. Their rooms really. She recognizes the tightness in his shoulders as bad news before she sees the scroll he's brooding over. She walks up behind him and bends, winding her arms across his collarbone, resting her chin on his shoulder, reading the scrawling ink even as he says, "The men are fed, now the horses are starving. We're running out of chaffed. There's no grazing lands left within reach. Winter could last years. Decades. How are we to outlast it when it's just begun and we're already struggling?"

"What happened to the grain stores in Cape Wrath?"

"The rebels burned it in the last attack." Crumpling the scroll in his fist, he tosses it across the desk and exhales his frustration. "No matter what we try to plan for, things go just wrong enough to almost ruin us. Either weather or idiotic traitors manage to get to all the secondary stores we've hidden and guarded and fucking relied on. Honeyholt still has their oats store, but we can't waste that
when the men will need it."

"Dorne could help."

"Aye. But they can't get a supply train through the Red Mountains and sailing it up the sea that far is asking for more loss until these storms die."

"I could take Drogon," she suggests, knowing he won't see the appeal of such. "We could escort them through the Prince's Pass to deter insurgents."

"That's what the Marchers are waiting for. It's too dangerous."

"They may be waiting for me, but they have no idea what they're in for."

"It's not worth the risk. We'll find another way." Under his breath, he swears, "I'll find another way."

"Fine," she says, tapping her fingers on his chest. Compromises, "But if we can't, Drogon and I will go."


She pulls away then, knowing he won't be happy about what she says next. "So, I've been speaking with your sister."

"Which one?"

"Arya. I'm growing concerned for her. Much as she was glad to be home and reunited with her family, she's restless here."

"So are you," he interrupts, dismissive. "Yet you do fine. What's your point?"

"Jon," she says, slow but pointed, drawing him around to face her. When he sees the graveness in her eyes, he leaves his chair. Stands before her in dread. "I don't know her very well, it's true, but I see her. I hear her. There are things, for whatever reason, she is able to say to me that she cannot to those she loves."

"What things?"

"I will not break her confidence. But I am worried."

"What are you trying to tell me?"

"She has goodness in her," Daenerys assures him. Then continues, knowing it may turn him from her, "But she has a dark heart. She's consumed by the gruesome life she's been forced to lead. It's not something a person leaves behind easily."

"That's true for all of us," he argues. "How much does your heart crave violence? How many nights have I woken you? Almost hurt you?"

"You've never hurt me."

"I could have."

"It's not the same. You've been scarred by battle. My anger makes me want to see evil men punished. True. We have much darkness in us. But Arya… Jon, Arya has known killing in a way you nor I have. She's had a closer look at it. She's cradled it more intimately. She knew it at such a young age,
I fear it's warped the whole of who she is."

"Don't go there. You have no right to condemn her—"

"That's not what I'm doing. I don't judge her." She raises her hands up between them to placate his defensiveness. "I worry for her. I worry we cannot help her."

"I can help her," he snaps. "Whatever she needs."

"Do you know she spends the nights she cannot sleep in the kennel? Toying with the wight?"

"She's trying to find solutions. I may not like it, but I know why she does it."

"Do you? I don't think even she can admit why she goes out there. Do you know what her first suggestion to me was on the ship back from Eastwatch? Her first idea of how to take King's Landing? She wanted to trigger the wildfire caches under the city. She said it was the simplest solution."

"You're lying," Jon rasps, but it's weak. He doesn't believe himself. He turns away from her and rakes a hand through his unkempt curls, settling into the unthinkable.

She goes on as kindly as she can, "When she saw my horror at her words, she told me a story about a little girl crushed in a mob of ugly hateful people. The girl watched her father be murdered and all she could hear were their cheers. She hated them for that. Part of her wanted them to burn for that. She knew it was an awful thing to want. She said she knew it wasn't justice, and she'd never be able to wash the blood from her hands, but she said that was already true, and she wouldn't pretend she didn't want what she wanted."

"But she didn't do it."

"No. She didn't. I don't really believe she would've. Now that I know her better than I did that day, I believe she would've stopped it in time if I'd given that command. But ignoring that she thought to is dangerous."

"Arya's come back to us from hell," Jon tells her, sinking to the bed to rest his arms on his knees and stare at the gnarled floor. "You can't expect her to be…"

He can't finish, doesn't know how to say those words, and she won't make him. She contemplates kneeling before him, drawing his attention, distracting him, but she passes the impulse. She moves to sit beside him on the bed instead. She chooses her words with a lot of care. "She talks about what she's seen through the years. The effects of war between kings and lords on the people on the ground, the ones with no say and nothing to do with it. The smallfolk that suffer for it. The children that are victimized in it. She spent too much time in Harrenhal, in the prison camp. She spent too much time under the abusive tutelage of the House of Black and White. Seeing the worst of what men had to offer, on the Kingsroad, on the streets of Braavos. She was younger than us, Jon. She was more malleable to it."

"She's wild," he says. "She's always been. But she's still a kind girl."

"Yes, she's kind," she agrees. "She's also cruel."

"So are you." It's a thoughtless counter, and she doesn't disagree, but when he sees the complicated flicker in her eyes, he says, "So are we. Though you are far better at the kindness part than I've been, I'm afraid."
"I don't obsess over the memory of driving a knife into a man's eye, removing it, cutting out his tongue, wanting to do it again."

"Gods," Jon groans, and his brow drops to his knuckles.

"She wants to be a good person. She likes the idea of protecting people. And taking care of her family. Helping you. But she has a taste for the grislier things and she struggles to ignore that."

"Then she shouldn't ignore it. Right?" He looks to her. "That's a dangerous way to cope with those sort of problems. She should— No, not embrace it, but…"

"It's a hard thing to find an answer to," she sympathizes. Winds her arm around his and slides her fingers down to lace into his. "It's not something you can fix for her. I can't be fixed. You can't be fixed. We all must live with ourselves the best we can."

"Maybe we can't be fixed, but we can be helped," he insists.

"Hopefully."

"What was it that made you finally say something? Has she hurt someone?"

"No," Daenerys reassures, quick and vehement, meeting the pleading bronze intensity of his eyes with as much calm as she has to offer. "But she is feeling more and more useless here. You've kept her from the ranging parties and the scouts and the patrols and you've denied her request every time she's asked to go out and settle a dispute with the rebellious Houses. I fear soon she may stop asking."

"You think I should use her as my pet assassin?" he challenges.

"Absolutely not, but she does need a purpose. What has driven her forward for so long has been this certainty in herself, that she was meant for a terrible purpose. Give her something else to feel fulfilled in. Give her another way to protect her family."

"Like what?"

"I don't know," she sighs. "Believe me, I've been searching for the right fit. Everything necessary these days is also terrible. But we must find it soon."

"Why?"

"What we were speaking of today," she tells him, tightening her grip on his hand because she knows he'll want to break away and pace, to anger and blame himself. "She would like to sail east after Littlefinger. Varys believes he's fled to Braavos."

"What would he be doing in Braavos?"

"Plotting against us most likely, if Sansa's opinion on the man is accurate. Which I have no doubt in, because Varys agrees. In Braavos, he could prove dangerous. I have many enemies there."

"It's one of your cities."

"It's under the Stormborn flag because it has no choice. But the people there, they despise me. With good reason, Jon." Feeling unsettled, feeling ashamed, she would rather shy away from the subject. But she won't allow herself that. "They hated Valyrians for a thousand years. And then I came. I decimated their army, which means a city full of people whose fathers and brothers and sons I killed."
I showed them the worst part of myself. I showed them nothing but my wrath. If someone was looking to rise up against me, Braavos is where he would go to find allies."

_Braavos is my greatest failing._

"You can't mean to convince me to send Arya east," he says in disbelief.

"The opposite. But if you don't give her something else, she will go regardless what either of us say."

"I'll talk to her. I'll change her mind."

"What if you can't?"

"I can't just let go of her, Dany."

One night, he wakes her. Or she wakes him. He's having dreams of dying again. She's having dreams of all their lands left in ruin. They lay together in the dark, listening to the white winds screeching outside, battering at the old stones of Winterfell's walls. Soothing each other.

"This is a dream that will not come true," he swears fiercely when she tells him of what she's seen. He doesn't even know if he believes it himself, but he clings to it with desperation and stubborn wildness. It's that same fierce resolve that drives him to finally bring up what he's been circling for years, if he's honest with himself. "Would you be my wife if I asked it of you?"

"Are you asking?" she retorts, being difficult.

"Would you be my wife?" he persists.

Dany pushes upright in bed. She folds her legs close and twists to sit facing him, hands in her lap, silver tresses shielding her bare body. "Are you absolutely sure that's what you want?"

Thoughtful, intense, "No matter what happens, I know I'll follow you. Wherever you go, whatever you do, however much the world tries to tear at us. I know I love you more than I've ever loved anything. Whether I'm hurt or angry or proud or awed or grateful or missing you or hating you, I always love you. I know that you only make me stronger, from the very beginning. You make me fight harder. You make me want to live. Aye, Dany, I'm sure I want you to be my wife. It's the very least I want from you, y'know, because I intend to have a long life with you and our family, whatever I have to do to ensure it. Will you have me?" Then he adds, only half joking, "Or would you rather wait for better prospects?"

The woman rolls her eyes at him. When he swings up, her fingers catch his jaw and her lips crush madly against his with a breathy laugh.

There's a knock at the door before she can answer. Missandei slips inside, her face gravely urgent. "Your Graces, you must come. Come now."

Jon just barely has enough time to drag up his trousers and throw his cloak over Dany's shoulders when she tries to walk out only wrapped in a sheet. They follow the Naathi hurriedly through the unlit corridors, leading them to Bran, before the greenseer changes everything.

_Viserion has risen. The Wall has fallen._
Chapter 17

Until The End of Days

Viserion brought down the Wall. The Night King resurrected her dragon. Wields him as a devastating weapon in his pursuit to bolster the dwindled numbers of his hordes after Hardhome and Eastwatch.

Bran announces this with an unnerving flatness and Daenerys goes cold against Jon, her hand disappearing out of his. Frozen, numb. Without a word, all the voices trying to reach her reduced to white noise, she walks out. One hand to her heart, one to her stomach, threatening to vomit, staring into nothing. By the time Jon can afford to follow, she's pushed past the tears into implacable, like stone.

"Dany."

"He stole my child from me," she whispers, eerie and strengthening. "He struck him down then he chained him. He's made a dragon into a slave. That, I cannot abide."

"We will—" he begins, but she's sharp to silence him.

"We won't." She hasn't looked at him. Refuses to turn away from the stars where she stands at the window, arms hugging her middle. When he crosses the unwelcoming distance and reaches for her, she wrenches, lifting a trembling hand to keep him at bay. If he holds her, she fears she might shatter.

"I was wrong. We can't be in this together. This is not your burden, Jon."

"Your burdens are my burdens."

"That's my child. He calls out to me. I was supposed to save this land and instead I wrought its destruction. I was going to remake the world. And now..." Her voice breaks. Her stone crumbles. She puts her hands over her face to hide it, scrubs at it, exhaling harshly, shuddering with it.

"Viserion's sacrifice was supposed to save lives. Now it's doomed us all."

If she'd never brought her dragons west, he'd still have a fighting chance.

Can't he see that?

"You're not alone in this, Daenerys." He pushes through the distance she'd insisted on, grabs her hands, tightens a grip on them to ground her. "You're not alone."

"But I am. I must be."

"What are you saying? What do you think you must do?" he demands, angered by the dread in him.

She wishes she could reassure him. She's crying again, but she's strong. Resolute in a grieving graveness and a quiet fury. "I did not bring my people here to be slaughtered, especially not by my child. I left him. I brought him into danger where he did not want to go and then I abandoned him to this fate."

"Dany," he warns, not liking what he suspects comes next. His fingers drift from her knuckles against her chest to the thick of her arms, tightening around them to keep her in place, though she
hasn't tried to break away yet.

She just says, "I must go. I must face him."

"When the time is right. When we've a strategy and a high ground to lay our fight."

Ignoring the bruising pressure of his grip, she lays her hands on his jaw, drawing close enough to kiss, but she doesn't kiss him. She rests her brow to his and shuts her eyes and lets out a steadying breath. "Take care of your pack, Jon Snow. Stark, Targaryen, whatever would make you happy to be."

"You are my pack."

"I'm not. I'm sorry." She drops her hands, steps back, pulling through his resistance to get free. "A dragon is a solitary creature," she reminds herself, drawing up with steel, embracing the fatalistic fears she'd once resigned herself to. Trying to bring back that barrier they worked so hard to banish. "A dragon plants no trees."

"Fuck that," Jon growls. Stalks after her every step she takes to gain distance, getting in her face with his anger, his hand gesturing sharply. "That's names and sigils and metaphors. You're not a dragon, Dany. You're a woman." He snatches at her when she would push him back. Unclasps his cloak from around her, lets the heavy fur fall to the floor. "You're not solitary. You're a mother. You're a queen. You keep us all together and fighting." He fists a hand in the knot at her chest and unwraps her out of the trailing sheet until it pools with the fur. His fingers mark into her warm flesh to prove his point. "Don't be stupid." Pulling at her hip, he makes her stagger over the haphazard pile and crash into him. Voice going lower, hoarser, free hand cupping her face, "You're not a dragon. You're a woman. You're my woman. And this is your pack. You're not going to abandon us."

*I'm trying to save you. She can't find her voice. I don't want to go. It's the only thing I know to do. It's what I have to do.*

When she tries again to separate, Jon hugs her to him until she softens in resignation and melts against him. He sinks his hands into her hair, gripping her hard, and kisses her. Bruises her lips, steals her breath. When she wraps her arms around his neck, he moves his hands lower, hugging around her again. Hoists her high off the floor above him, neck craning to keep kissing her. Her legs latch behind his back. He turns, shoves forward until her back slams to the stone, crushing her body against his. Her hips swivel, grinding down the clenched muscles of his abdomen, spine arching. She twists her fingers in his unkempt curls while he wrenches the laces apart and shoves his trousers out of the way.

"You'll never be alone again," he reminds her, mouth moving roughly against her jaw as she pants. A vow just as much for himself as it is for her.

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While she sleeps, Jon eases cautiously out of bed, dresses, and closes the door behind him. He hesitates on the other side of that heavy wood, torn with frustration and indecision and panic, palm to its coarse surface as he takes bracing breaths. Bolts it locked before he turns away and goes looking for help, knowing he could be making a grave mistake, knowing he has no other way to be sure.

Dany has lost her mind. She's provoked irrationally by the ties to her dragons, not seeing things clearly. She means to go get herself killed. Taking Drogon to face Viserion alone is suicide. She means to command her armies to obey him, to face this fight on her own with her black child as she's done so many times before. She doesn't expect to come back and she won't if he lets her go. He
won't let her go.

But he can't have his people and hers turning against each other.

He goes to Grey Worm, pulling the Unsullied commander from his bed. This must be done before she wakes, before she realizes what's happening and causes violence when her Unsullied and Dothraki respond to her fury.

"Your queen intends to ride off on her dragon without us, without you, to face the monsters herself. To protect us. We're the ones that should be protecting her, aren't we? She saved you. She freed you. You love her?"

"Yes." Grey Worm is trying to stay stoic, but Jon can see how deeply this idea troubles him. Good.

"Then help me save her."

Missandei stands unconvinced beside her Unsullied, no heed of her immodest shift. "You mean to make us treasonous."

"I mean to keep her alive. Don't you?"

Dany is unsurprisingly wrathful to find herself captive. Betrayed by her own most faithful servants. He knows it hurts, and he's risking all that they've rebuilt between them, and he hates it. Drogon responds to his mother's rage, landing on the battlements near Jon's rooms, threatening them, but Jon won't back down. He calls the dragon's bluff, and it is a bluff, because Dany won't let him burn Winterfell.

That doesn't stop everybody from erupting into hysterical havoc.

"How long do you honestly think you can go on this way?" Sansa demands in exasperation, following as he's striding the corridors back to the family wing.

"Until someone succeeds in talking sense to her."

He's had Arya staying with her while he's been occupied arranging for the new tactics to their defenses. It's a weak hope that she'll be able to succeed where he'd failed, and Missandei and Davos had failed, but it's all he's got.

The council meeting was tense enough from recent developments, never mind adding his conflict with the queen to the mood of the hall. Especially since some of them have the stupidity and the audacity to think it's a good thing, what she wants to do. As if that's their best chance instead of the worst thing that could possibly turn the tide of this war so irrevocably.

When he trades places with his little sister, he stands by the closed door, waiting to gauge just how volatile he's made her, whether he's welcome in or not. She's abed, lounging in one of her inappropriate Meereenese gowns, but she pushes up after a stretch of awkward silence, coming onto her knees in a mess of rumpled bedding to stare him down.

"Are you going to physically stop me?" she challenges, cold and dangerous.

"If I must."

Imperiously, "You can't stand guard day and night. You may have convinced Grey Worm to help
you keep the Dothraki at bay, but my Unsullied will not put their hands on me."

"The Mother's Men will. Marselen will. To save you."

Dany settles back on her haunches, looking away, deflating slightly. She mutters, "You've earned their loyalty. I knew you would."

"I did. But they'll always be loyal to you foremost. That's what this is. They're grateful to you. They love you. And he knows you're even more important than that to his sister."

"Is this what you think our marriage would be? You get to lock me in a tower whenever you don't like my decisions?"

"That's not fair."

"Oh?"

"When I wanted to go kill myself, you stopped me. I never held it against you, did I? You kept me on your island when I got the idea because you knew I needed you to protect me from myself until I stopped being an idiot. I understood that."

"I'm being an idiot?" she retorts, brow arching.

"You know bloody well you are," he snaps.

Her calm flies out the window, fire lashing her up to her feet and towards him, ignited by his frustration. "Everything we've fought for! All the armies we've brought together to give us the upper hand, it's a disadvantage now. It will become our downfall. They will all die. They will turn against us. This world will burn if I don't go out there and try to free my child."

"No, it will burn if you go out there and give him Drogon too."

"Jon—"

"Jaime Lannister brought you down out of the sky the first opportunity he got, didn't he? The first time he faced you. That means there is a good chance we can bring Viserion down without this turning into a Dance of Dragons."

"Winterfell isn't prepared to defend against a dragon, Jon. What if he flies here?" Then, exposing what this is really about, what matters most, "What if he flies to Dragonstone?"

He's had the same paralyzing fear since he heard the news. But he can't let her see that. "He has no reason to go to Dragonstone."

"We don't know what his reasons are!" she shouts, spinning away. Then softer, distraught, "We know nothing about this creature."

Jon struggles to remain steadying. "Rhaegal will protect our son."

"I don't know if Rhaegal can survive against a wight dragon. I don't know if his fire will burn him."

He's restrained himself from following after her, but when she sinks dejectedly to sit on the chest at the end of the bed, he crosses and kneels before her. He takes her hands into his, bringing one up to press his mouth to her palm, squeezing the other hard. She's the one always steeling him, making him believe, making him stand tall. He needs to be able to give that back to her, but he doesn't know how.
"I'm sorry for locking you in. I didn't know how else to make you wait."

"You couldn't have. I meant to leave before you woke."

"If you were really determined about your choice, I know you could've gotten out the window. I've seen all the ways you're able to mount him. But you didn't. You stayed. Because you know I'm right."

"Of course you're right," she says, exasperated. "But what else is there to do, Jon? There's a reason I won every conflict I took on. We can't send our men up against an undead army and a dragon. It's too much. It's too impossible. We'll fail."

"Maybe we will. But if you go and you fall, all is lost."

"It's not yet?" she counters, disbelieving.

"Not yet," he stubbornly insists, and kisses her wrist. "We're still breathing, we're still here. We've still got a chance."

"Will you imprison me in until I promise not to go?" she wonders, almost idly.

He's tempted. Between the terror for Jaeh being so far away and the panic for what Dany might do, he doesn't know if he's strong enough to hold to trust alone.

On a resigned sigh, he ends up saying, "I needed you to give it time. I needed you to calm down and think it through. To weigh the risks." Then he looks into her eyes again, willing her to see his own resolve. "But if you choose to fly north to face him now, I'll have to follow."

"Jon—"

"You go, I go," he vows.

He'll follow. He'll have to. But he'll be too late. He won't be able to save her when she's up in the sky. He can't stand between her and the Night King as he'd intended. And then there'll be nothing left. There'll be no way to win this war.

After a torturous deliberating pause, Dany surrenders. "You go, I go."

Relief bends him over. Weariness. He drops his forehead to her knee for just a heartbeat, gratitude that he won't have to wage this battle. Not like this.

"I can't just sit here and wait," she whispers.

"Then take Drogon," he says, and she looks to him in surprise. "Take him to Dragonstone. Be with Jaeh."

"I'm not leaving you to face this alone."

"So come back when we need you. But go now."

Dany nods, a sigh of bone deep relief leaving her at the thought of holding her son soon, he knows, envies it. Her body drops forward, drawn to him, pressing her face against his neck with another deep exhale. It's not easy to ignore the mindless fear in the back of his head, that panic of the possibility, that tiny chance that she'll take to the sky with her dragon and never come back. That she'll do as she said she must and try to save them all.
He has to have faith that seeing Jaeh will bring her to her senses.

Jon holds her for a long time.

Flying off on Drogon, she knows her people are heartsick and dreading. But her resolve has wavered. She's torn, weakened, going back and forth in what she should do as they push through the bitter weather to Dragonstone.

"Mama!" the boy crows when he sees her coming up the stairs. He runs for her in excitement and jumps into her arms and she hefts him onto her hip and keeps going to get inside, kissing at his face to make him laugh and squirm.

The flight has left her stiff and sore and strangely shaky. She ignores all that, because nothing is wrong, not here, not now. It's like refilling a hollow part of herself with what's been missing, having him in her arms again, back where he belongs.

She looks at Jaehaerys and imagines her first son. Her lost son. Her first lost son. She imagines if Rhaego had lived. If they were brothers.

Daenerys relieves Jhiqui of her work, letting the woman do as she will while the queen and her son sit on the floor finishing the puzzle he'd been in the middle of. They eat together and then she goes slow through his bath routine, playing more than they normally would, letting him talk and talk himself winded, telling her all about what she's missing every day and asking her when she'll be able to come home so he doesn't have to tell her all these stories and she can just know them already.

"Soon, my love. Soon," she lies.

Once they're bundled into bed and she's reading him a book, Jaeh finally asks, "Papa's not coming?"

"Not this time. He's very busy protecting us all from the ice monsters, but he misses you so much."

"How much? This much?" he asks, holding up his fingers.

She grabs his hands and kisses them then pushes them outward until his arms are stretched to the limit. She stretches her own arms past his in an even wider sprawl. "This much!"

The boy laughs. He never doubts it.

Wouldn't it be lovely, she thinks, to never go back. To hide here on this island with her remaining children while the world around them turns to ice and death. No, not lovely. Sickening, devastating, but at least she would have her babies.

After a few days, she knows she's risked all the time away she can.

In the morning, she says her goodbyes and sends Jaeh running off to the other little ones waiting for him down the path, distracting him before he can get too worked up and have a meltdown. She intends to slip away while he's happy, but she moves to step away from her Dothraki and a dizziness comes over her. A sudden sharp fatigue. She sways, nearly faints.

Kovarro has to catch her against his chest, scowling. "Khaleesi not taking care of herself anymore."
"Did you eat?" Jhiqui asks.

Daenerys shakes her head, palm to his shoulder as she pushes off her bloodrider, straightening with too much effort. "That must be it." But she's unconvinced. She's been pushing herself hard these days, but not so hard as she has in the past.

"Stay, Khaleesi." Her handmaiden rubs a soothing hand up and down her arm. "Eat with us in the sun. Let the babe play."

"Good idea."

So she lets them lead her down the path toward the gathering and bring her out a feast to take her full of. Jaeh runs between the table and his friends, crawling up and down from her lap every few minutes. He wants to be with his mother, climbing up and hugging at her and pressing his cheek to her chest, but he's got too much energy to sit around while the others run wild and shriek. She shoves food into her mouth, not realizing how hungry she'd been until it's there in front of her and she's smelling all the scents and she's ravenous for it all. As she does, she watches the happiness of them all, her son and her people, watches the peace here.

This is what we're fighting for.

No ice, no monsters, no dragonfire will destroy this.

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Drogon wants to go. He feels it's his responsibility. He's the one that forced his brother to follow them. He's the one that felled him, should've protected him, and now it's his place to break the chains and put his brother to rest.

She feels this. She hears him. But she fights him.

I don't want to die, she pushes at him. She doesn't want to doom the world any worse than she already has by bringing another of her dragons into the Night King's grasp should they fail. She doesn't know what to do.

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When the queen returns to Winterfell, she summons the councils together in the great hall. As they gather, she discusses it with Jon, making sure he's behind her on this, making sure he's got nothing better. Then she orders everything that can float to be commandeered from Westeros and Essos and everywhere within reach. Everything other than the warships they still need. Vessels made available for a mass evacuation. She orders every port along the Essos coast open to welcome the flood of Westerosi refugees. Captains and their mercenaries to rally this, to herd them, to force them if necessary. Lead them to the vast fertility of the Dothraki Sea, she declares. Build tent cities there, settlements eventually, if this war goes on. No more waiting, hoping this will turn out well. No more betting the fate of millions of people on this one fight.

The hall is in uproar before she even gets halfway through.

When Jon silences them, the little Lady Mormont is quiet and somber and severe. A graveness they all share, a gravity like there's never been before. "You mean to abandon our home. Not just the North, but all of Westeros."

"No. We will stay. We will fight until we cannot fight any longer. But everyone else must go."
"The dragon is a game changer," Jon agrees, but the decision lands heavy for them all. They'd rested so much in having the Wall to wage their defense from. It hadn't occurred to any of them that it could fall so thoroughly. So irrevocably. "If we wait and they make it past us out of the North, it'll be too late. Everyone will die. Everyone will join them. They'll be unstoppable then. The rest of the world won't have a chance."

"How is this a surprise to you?" she retorts, rounding on him so fast he almost crashes into her. They'd been stalking the corridors during their argument. "All you've been working for since landing on Dragonstone is to have me in battle with you."

"No. I wanted your armies. Your dragons. Not you."

"Oh?"

Jon huffs an impatient breath. "Y'know what I mean. Not in battle against him."

"My dragons without me?" she scoffs.

"Drogon did it before. At Riverrun. He fought for us without you controlling him."

"Drogon perhaps," she allows. "His brothers, no. And you thought I would ever send my children into battle without me with them? With what the White Walkers are capable of? And now…" She turns away, starts walking again, Jon falling into step beside her. She's softer, less argumentative, more helpless. "Now they have Viserion. How do you expect to defeat him if not for Drogon and I in the sky? I won't make him face his brother alone."

"Dany, please." He takes her gently by the elbow, urging her to meet his begging stare. "You know why we can't risk it."

"If we don't, they'll slaughter our armies and I'll have to face him anyway, but by then they'll have grown too strong."

"We can't risk it," Jon insists again, pulling her towards him. She reluctantly comes, trying to stand stern under his emotion. "Everything has changed. What we'd intended is no longer feasible. Any of it. We can't risk Drogon." Then he levers his knuckles below her chin, thumb scraping across her lips. "And I can't risk you."

She's relentless. "How can we not?"

Very palpably swallowing her pride, Lady Lyanna Mormont approaches the lord's table only after the usual discord dies down and the rest of the hall is emptying. The look on her pale austere face makes it clear she wants privacy for this, while not outright willing to admit that.

It's been an unproductive meeting, but nothing out of the ordinary. More bad news delivered, ever grim reports, and the same old arguments between the same old hostile parties. When the queen starts to feel defensive and slighted and her temper quickens at the way her peoples, the ones dearest to her heart, are seen so unfairly by these Westerosi, condescended to and disdained of and dismissed, her patience is tested beyond all her years. She must remember that it is not exclusive to her. Jon's wildlings have bore just the same brunt here among them. These northerners especially are the most obstinate kind she's ever known in all the world. The blind intensity with which they are determined to cling to their old grudges is astounding.
Perhaps she was mistaken in leaving Tyrion to King's Landing. Perhaps the more challenging politicking lies up here after all.

But this girl has been the lone voice of clarity rising above the loud angry men of the northern Houses. She's not a fan of the queen just yet, that's clear, but she's not preoccupied with pettiness or ego or bad blood either. She is an interesting one. She questions them at every turn, doesn't ever balk, yet she seems to be withholding her judgment for another day. Even more intriguing to the queen, though they themselves don't appear to be aware of just how much so, the northern lords are influenced by her. They listen when she speaks. This child ruler who reigns over an impoverished House out in a sprawling wilderness with a small populace and a positively paltry forty professional soldiers left under their banner.

"When every major House with decent enough army left shut their doors in our face as we came begging, Lyanna Mormont committed the sixty-two men that had survived Robb's war to retake Winterfell," Jon had told her one afternoon, as her interest caught in the girl and she'd asked after her. There was a rare admiration in his gruff tone when he'd spoke of her. A subtle fondness. Impressed. "Out of the thousands killed by the Boltons, Mormont lost just twenty."

"They must be quite the warriors," she'd noted.

"I believe the girl's words were something along the lines of how every man and woman of Bear Island each fights with the strength of ten mainlanders."

"Then you're lucky you swayed their loyalty."

"It was Davos actually. After Sansa and I both made fools of ourselves trying to charm her, he swooped in and appealed to her greater sense of duty. Turns out, she's a lot more pragmatic than the lords I'm used to dealing with. Braver."

"She'd have to be, given what she's working with."

"Aye," he'd laughed.

Daenerys is pushed from her seat to pace, restless and idle, lost in her thoughts. Only Jon and his sisters remain at the table, with Davos and Missandei lingering, all their other advisors taking leave at the dismissal. She tries to not be reminded of Jorah when she turns to face his fierce little cousin, but it is difficult.

"Our last ships have filled with every man, woman, and child of Bear Island that could be gathered," Lady Lyanna says, her hard gaze fixed on Jon. "But they will not go south and they will not go east. We are Northmen. We are fighters, every last one of us. We shall remain with our king. So I must ask for safe haven."

What she doesn't say is what Varys has already informed his queen, why the whole of the island has been emptied. It's not at the Dragon Queen's order of exodus as much as it is by unforeseen necessity. On an island, they should be safe. Safer than the rest of Westeros. But the fish have fled the Bay of Ice and the waters have begun to freeze on their northernmost east coast. Winter has always hit the island hardest of all the North. Now it devastates. If it continues in such a way, signs point to a contest between whether they'll face starvation before there's a bridge of solid land for the undead to cross and sweep through.

They are too proud to call it what it is, but they are fleeing, same as everyone.

"Your islanders are more than welcome at Winterfell," Sansa assures.
But Jon jumps in, "They'll need to cross the Wolfswood quickly. Latest reports have a horde moving down westward."

So the lady simply gives her thanks and goes.

In her wake, Arya points out, "Winterfell is awfully crowded already."

"There aren't but a few hundred of them left these days," Davos counters.

"We'll make room," Jon agrees.

"If we can't," Sansa cuts in, "they can always be diverted to one of the keeps that've been deserted by the discontents."

Daenerys turns on her heel, head tilted, to give the redhead an amused look. "Discontents? Is that what you call your traitors?"

"They're not mine," the younger woman retorts, not quite bristled, but lifting herself in her seat as if unsure whether to feel defensive or not. Unsure of Daenerys entirely, she's noticed. Whereas Arya seems surprisingly keen to her, quick and easy to see something in the queen she's attracted to and can liken with, Sansa is a foreign entity. Her distrust is not hostile, merely confused. Watchful, uncertain. Insecure behind the cool proper mask, at the edge but not eager to become antagonistic. It could go either way between them, Daenerys suspects. "And you don't know that they're traitors. They haven't turned against us yet. They've just fled."

"They abandoned their duty to their homeland in its hour of need."

"You disgraced them by offering up their homes to foreign invaders."

"I did that," Jon cuts in on her behalf.

"They disgraced themselves with their behavior," Daenerys returns, more hotly than she meant to, both women ignoring him.

Far too many highborns of the northern kingdoms in fighting shape had joined the very first wave of exodus, back before the Wall fell, back when it was only meant to be the young and the feeble and the untrained going south to make room for soldiers better equipped for the war. But they didn't go south with their smallfolk. They went east to find allies of like mind. They found that in the Company of the Rose.

And why? If the propaganda would be listened to, because an evil conqueress swept over their realm and ripped all their rightful land and wealth from them to hand to her raping murderous savages. But no, because she did nothing of the kind, though the more time she spends with these ilk, the more tempted she is in some cases.

They deserted because they didn't like how the land was being commandeered to host the armies necessary to save this realm. Because they didn't like feeling brought to level with savages and interlopers. Even though those so called savages have come to help them win this war, they'd prefer they stay in their place, down at the bottom where they belong.

And they'd found no greater frothing rage than at their skewed perception of how the beloved North's new king had become a whipped dog at the Dragon Queen's feet. So they say, spreading their scorn. Demeaning both her and Jon and themselves in one breath.

"The fact of the matter," Sansa continues carefully, avoiding her brother's quelling look in favor of
meeting the queen's gaze with a respectable steadiness, "is we failed to manage all of our interests accordingly, whoever was right or wrong, and now we pay for it from those we left unsatisfied."

"True," she concedes, only after a reluctant moment, letting go of her anger with a long sigh. Daenerys casts her distracted focus out the window into watery daylight. She takes the drink Missandei wordlessly offers with the flash of a grateful smile, her best friend more attuned than most, knowing she hasn't felt quite well in awhile. "Leave off the lords for now. I'd rather finish our discussion from this morning."

"Go in circles again, you mean," Arya quips.

And her brother's mood darkens with stress. "It's not worth the risk," he says for the hundredth time, throwing an exasperated look around the table, hands turning up. "How can I win this argument? Someone give me the words."

"It will be good practice for Drogon and I at avoiding assaults from the Walkers and also much needed practice for the men manning the ballistae for when they're faced with Viserion in the sky."

"It couldn't hurt," Davos cajoles at Jon, earning him a scowl.

"It could hurt. It could very much hurt. One of those bolt throwers could get lucky and we could kill off our queen and our most powerful weapon both before the war even gets full swing."

"How is Drogon our most powerful weapon if everyone around me keeps insisting that I mustn't utilize him?" she challenges.

"Nobody's saying never use him," Jon argues. "But we have to do so with caution and restraint."

"Speaking of dragon utilization," Davos jokes, interrupting before Daenerys can throw her next parry at the king. He derails the futile argument with a precisely chosen venture. "I might be overstepping here, but back in the age there was an abundance of both, Targaryens rode dragons, am I right? And now there's not but two Targaryens in the entire world. And two dragons."

Daenerys and Jon turn together and lock stares at that. "I'm not—" He catches his tongue on the forceful denial, but she hears those words anyway. *I'm not Targaryen.* As if it were such a shameful thing to be. She sees the regret in his eyes, but it doesn't matter. Whatever he might say aloud to her, that's still the first that comes to him unthinkingly. Doesn't that make it the deepest truth? "I'm not a dragonrider," he says instead, watching her, considerate of how all this makes her feel.

He needn't be. Whatever he thinks of her family, she won't let herself be offended. And as for the dragons…

Well, that leaves her torn. It's not a new thought, not by far. The idea of Jon having with Rhaegal what she has with Drogon leaves her strangely warm. *As an idea.* In reality, it tangles an uncomfortable knot in the pit of her stomach.

"I birthed them, raised them from hatchlings, and yet it still took years of tribulation before Drogon and I developed that bond. Even then," she admits, only because just their closest counsel and no one else remain to hear, "the only way I manage it is our mental link. That's a magic I don't fully understand."

Davos starts to say, "But Targaryens of old—"

"Her dragons are her children," Jon interjects, solemn and unshakable, diverting his Hand before he can question her. "It's not just a saying. Her children, not the tamed and saddled and chained beasts
of old."

And there it is. That's when she realizes what that vague aversion deep inside her is born from. Perhaps he's beginning to know her better than she knows herself. Or perhaps she's just been too preoccupied. Targaryens rode dragons hundreds of years ago by taming them, in the basest sense of the word. They were broken arduously to their masters like horses.

There's a reason she has not saddled Drogon, though it would be safer for her, make her ride easier. She will not lay any chain on her children. She's learned her lesson of that grave mistake. She still pays for it in the smaller weaker stature of his siblings, who hadn't grown or thrived as well as their brother, who remained free under the sky while they languished in a dark pyramid, collared. She pays for it in the distance between them, the thinner thread of that mental link when she tries to reach for the other two, where her link to Drogon has become like a fifth limb, always present at the forefront. No, it's not the same thing as what she'd done, chaining a saddle to a dragon's back for riding. But it is of a similar vein.

Not that she would know how to go about that. She'd painstakingly fostered the dragons as her children, not mounts, not weapons. Now she uses them as both of those things, but only of their own free will. Only by loving them and disciplining them and encouraging them and protecting them as best she is able. Even if they had the time or Jon had the inclination to try bonding with Rhaegal enough to let him ride, she'd never let anyone, not even Jon Snow, chain her child.

And how would anyone else ride him, steer him, be one with him the way she is with Drogon, when no one else has the connection she has to her dragons? Putting a man on the back of a dragon and sending them into the sky as if it's at all the same as riding a horse would only endanger them both.

She responds to Drogon deeply intuitively, and Drogon responds to her in kind, a symbiotic merger of emotions and thoughts and directions. It's nowhere near as simple as commanding him to fly or breathe fire. Once he's in the sky, he must be able to react to her in the smallest most intricate way. To turn here, now, this far, this fast, tip like that, twirl there, dive, lift, burn those specks down there but not the others right there. That's how they both survive every time she takes Drogon into the sky. That's why it was Viserion and not Drogon the Night King was able to fell. And all of that comes, not from the hands or any words, but from the mind.

When they take flight, her instincts are Drogon's instincts and vice versa.

Daenerys has thought long and hard over the years on Drogon's once mysterious kinship to Jon Snow, his willingness to befriend him and fight for him. And to know when he's in danger somehow. Whatever magic lies in dragons, they know things, don't they? They are enigmatic creatures. Even with her link the strongest it's ever been to him, she still has so many unanswered questions. Her son retains many secrets. But when it comes to Jon, she'd been glad he'd taken to watching over him. It's one of the few comforts she holds to at the thought of her dying. That if she were gone, he would keep close to Jon and make sure his brothers did the same, and they would look after each other. She is comforted by the belief that Jon may hold some measure of influence over them when she isn't there, that he may guide them to some degree.

But to try making him a dragonrider in his own right feels … wrong. As if it would be, not just a failure, but putting both him and the dragon in danger.

She's quietly but immensely relieved when he seems immediately against the suggestion, so much more so than she is a little hurt, as if it's some rejection of her and her children. Which she knows it's not. That's the irrational woman in her. Or her pride. Whatever it is, it's inconsequential.

What matters is that he feels the same, and understands, even anticipating better than she what the
true problem would be.

"It's worth an attempt, isn't it?" Sansa counters. "It'd be invaluable."

"Wouldn't work," Arya tells her sister, smirking. "Much fun as it is on top of her behemoth out there, we all know Jon's got too much wolf's blood for all that. And you heard her. A mental link. You gotta have a dragon in your head."

Something in his sister's words must amuse him, because Jon's smile that suddenly blooms is the sincerest glimpse of lightheartedness she's seen from him in weeks. "Aye, and I don't need anything else crowding up my head, do I? I've already got Ghost taking space. Don't know how well he'd like sharing."

They all laugh a little at the joke, but the tension is still there, underlying. Davos and Sansa clearly aren't ready to give up on the idea, and neither of the other three are keen to pursue the argument, while Missandei is as always highly observant and incredibly inscrutable.

When his sister tries to bring it up again, Jon waves her off, dismissing, "It's irrelevant conjecture either way. Whether we had a second dragonrider or not, the risk is too great to fly Drogon towards the Walkers, never mind them both. Look at the damage he's wrought with just one of them. Imagine if he's able to raise all three."

And on that grim note, the day's meeting ends back at the usual overwhelmed mood of desolation. They'd almost had a good moment, hadn't they?

"Do you wish you weren't?"

"What?"

"My blood, Rhaegar's son," Dany answers, turning away before he can study her complicated expression. She wanders restlessly, ends up at the table by the hearth to peruse a bowl of fruits. Unusual arrays in the North, what she'd been given by the thankful Lady Kenning after the last brushfire that built to an inferno.

He's upright in bed by now, knees bent, elbows hooked at them, sheet spilling. He circles his wrist with thumb and forefinger, deciding to be open about this. Saying, "Honestly? I'd rather be Ned Stark's son, aye." But also, "I'm glad Lyanna Stark's my mother, but Rhaegar Targaryen... I don't know. I grew up thinking he was the son of a bitch that stole my aunt and started a war. Raped her, left her for dead. A spoiled prince at best, a monster at worst. It's taking time to shift that in my mind. And ultimately it doesn't really matter. The past is the past, whatever truth there is in all these different stories we hear."

"But you don't like the thought of being Targaryen."

He can see it in her face, even as she keeps it smooth, that it hurts her. He hurts her with his reluctance. He wishes he could tell her he feels Targaryen. That he's thrilled. He wishes his confusion or ambivalence on the matter didn't make her wonder what he really thinks of where she comes from. Because he can see her wondering, pretending she's not, wondering if some part of him might think all the slander Westeros speaks of her family is true and that she's tainted by her blood or that he'd rather she wasn't Targaryen at all. That he thinks less of her for it. But it isn't that.

Starks have had plenty of madness in their history. They've a long legacy of brutality and sordidness, just the same as every other House. More so actually, these fabled Winter Kings. They have a lot
darker legacy, despite what Northmen might say, and a lot less gold glory and greatness than her
dynasty. He doesn't think Starks are better than Targaryens. He just … feels like he's only ever had
one family. He feels like the only Targaryen that's his family is her.

All he can give her is this, "If I wasn't Rhaegar's son, Drogon wouldn't've brought you to me, would
he? That's all I need to make me grateful."

"But you'd hate for the world to know the truth."

"Hate is a strong word. I'm afraid of all the trouble it'll cause us. There's nobody northerners despise
more than Rhaegar and his father. It's so much of why they resist against you. At the end of the day,
my kingdoms support me for being Ned Stark's son and what that signifies. If they find out I'm
Rhaegar's, we'll have a lot less allies from that day on. It's better if I'm a Stark and you're a
Targaryen. I bring mine and you bring yours and we'll hopefully be able to bring them together."

"No, you're right," she replies quickly, waving aside her own argument before she even gets to make
it. She pops a date into her mouth to occupy herself, to mask her tone. "Of course it's wiser to not
open ourselves up to that mess, especially when we can't prove it and there's no real reason to. Now's
not the time. It's not as if I wouldn't advise the same. It's just…"

"You can't help but take it personally?" he guesses.

"Possibly," she concedes. "But that doesn't matter."

"It matters."

"This isn't about me. This about you." Then she holds the bowl to her chest and makes her way back
to bed. She hesitates there, standing over him, staring. He wishes he could figure out what she's
really thinking, because she's being too careful. She's been too careful about this topic since they first
found out. "Aside from the politics, you should do what feels right for yourself. We'll make it work
either way."

"And if I choose to be a Stark? You'll know that has nothing to do with what I feel for you? Or what
I think of your family?"

"Our family," she says under her breath. "I know what you feel for me."

"But?"

"If that's what you want, be a Stark." Dany fills her mouth with a handful of dates, buying herself
time with her chewing. Then, "I just hope you can eventually embrace both sides of your origins,
and not feel compelled to bury that part of yourself that's your father, because he was your father and
you are Targaryen."

"I'm not burying anything," he promises. His eyes drop down the length of her, thinking of reaching
out and fistng a hand in the folds of her dress, tugging her to him. But just before he moves to, she
turns and rounds the bed out of his grasp. She sets the bowl onto the chest at the foot of it and spills
herself across the bottom, lounging out, keeping close to her snacks. Jon just leans back to the
headboard and smiles.

After awhile, Dany wonders, "Are we making the wrong choice? Is Davos right about Rhaegal?"

"You said yourself, how you manage with Drogon is your bond."

"And you don't have that. But are you sure? When you're around them, do you not feel anything?
Not even the potential?"

Choosing his words with precision, not wanting to disappoint her, he tells Dany, "They're important to me because you love them. I'd protect them because they're yours. But no, I don't feel the way you do about the dragons. Or the way I feel about Ghost. I have that with him, something close to your bond, that awareness of him in my head, and sometimes an even closer connection in my dreams."

"Arya's right," she murmurs, staring at the ceiling, "your Stark blood is too strong."

"Do you wish it wasn't?"

"I don't know, Jon. Part of me does. Part of me doesn't."

"I don't think I belong on a dragon," he says. "I think we should trust our guts in this, shouldn't we? You know what your gut is telling you."

"I do."

"Besides, even trying to find out if it were possible would mean taking him away from Jaehaerys. That's just not an option."

She nods, still with that faraway daze on her face, one arm curled over her head, fingers idly twisting in her undone hair. "The only thing that lets me leave him at such an awful distance is knowing no one could get past his brother to hurt him."

Jon reassures, "Then don't let people that don't know as much as we do make you doubt that." Then he pushes aside all the maudlin indecisive worries of the day in favor of a relaxing night, something she's helped him become adept at. With a crooked grin, he stretches out one leg and nudges her ribs. "Are you gonna share any of that or gorge it all like the spoiled royal they call you?"

"You're asking for trouble," she warns, bright eyes narrowing in a glare even as her lips quirk begrudgingly, and throws a peach at his head.

One night, she finds herself telling stories of Tyrion. Listening longingly to Jon's own of his time with the dwarf on his first journey north. She misses his presence beside her fiercely some days. She finds herself telling Jon, "He doesn't approve of us, you know. He thinks my love for you compromises me."

"Maybe he's right. But his judgment on that can't be completely trusted."

Daenerys rolls onto her stomach, up on her elbows. "Why do you say that?"

"Because he has feelings for you."

"Excuse me?" she laughs.

Jon looks skeptical. "You really didn't know?"

"Not every man loyal to me has devoted himself because he fell in love with me," she counters, halfway to offended.

"Course not. But you can see it in his eyes when he speaks of you."

"I think you're wrong. I think Daario has gotten you paranoid."
"It's nothing against him," Jon sighs, twining a silver lock of her hair idly around his fingers. "It just shows he's as smart as he says he is."

She cares for Tyrion. He's her dear friend. She doesn't want Jon to be right. It's a ludicrous thought anyway. But if it were possible… She doesn't want her relationship with Tyrion to become what she had with Jorah. His pining pained her a little every day, that she could not give him what he wanted from her, and that he could not be what she wanted to find in him. But Tyrion's shown no sign of that. It's a ludicrous thought. Then again… "My Hand does have a penchant for romanticizing inappropriate women. Your sister, for instance."

"I'm sorry, my what now?"

Daenerys laughs.

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She sees fire. She sees snow. She sees blackened bones and wilting flowers. She sees rotting flesh and desecrated graves. She sees the torn leathern and bloodied scales of dragons left lifeless in the white. She walks across an empty world, a dead land, all alone. And in the distance, she hears the wolf howl.

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Arya is not coldblooded. She takes no pleasure in her deeds. She's haunted deeply by them. She's eaten at. Yet she fixates on her bloodlust. He doesn't know how to help her. He doesn't know the right words she needs to hear or the right task to give to pull her back from the edge of the abyss.

Sansa is consumed with terror, sick with it, riding hard under her disbelief of having worked and endured so much to get home only to see it heading toward ruin. She knows if the war comes this way, she'll have to go. He'll send her south to safety, probably to King's Landing to join Tyrion. She doesn't want that. She wants her home. She wants him to be a liar. She wants to be Lady of Winterfell with no White Walkers to worry about. She doesn't want to go, but she wants no part in the fight. She's strong, dutiful, never letting her mask slip when others are around. But in private, he sees her falling apart. And he flounders at comforting her.

Bran… Gods, Bran. His brother is lost to him. Right in front of him, he's gone. Something unnatural and all knowing sits in his place.

So when he comes back to his rooms for a moment of peace, it's the last thing he wants to find Dany in tears, staring out at the grey daylight, a vacant despair on her beautiful face.

In a moment of weakness, weariness, calm but defeated, she says, "All that we've built, how far we've come, what I fought so hard for… It's unraveling right in front of me. However high we rise, it's only that much farther to fall. You were right. I dreamed too big. I was a silly girl."

"Don't," Jon rasps. "Don't do that. Don't give up yet."

"I'm not giving up. I'm just accepting the reality we're faced with."

"No. The reality is… The reality…” Faltering, failing, grasping. Then suddenly, "You're a
phoenix. That's the reality." Stronger, fervent, he crosses the room to her. "Everything burns around you and you stay standing. You build from the ashes. You'll do it again." He sits down on the bed beside her, her back to the headboard, her legs curled under her. He reaches for her knee. "Now is not the time to give up on your dreams, not when we need them most."

"How many times can everything I care about dissolve to ash in my hands? How many times can I survive that? I don't want to start over, Jon. I don't want to lose it all. I'm too tired to build again."

"But you'll find the strength to anyway. I know you. You always do." His grip moves from her knee to her wrist, thumb rubbing, digging into the point there that relaxes her. "I'm selfish. I'd rather take you away and find a warm quiet place and make a home for us. Just us. But you'd never be satisfied. It might be what you want, but what you need is to be the protector. The creator."

"You'd never leave them to die," she whispers, stare still vacant. But then she turns to him, frowning, finally focusing on him. "You're not selfish. You've never been selfish. All you've ever done is put your people first."

"I did," he concedes. "I held to that, even before you. I challenged you for their sake, worried about how you might choose to wage your wars. Like I'd done all my life, I tried to continue putting my duty before anything else. I put it before you. But we've come too far. I can't do that again. The last time I truly chose my people over my love, she died in my arms. I won't do that with you. I won't lose you for them. I don't care what kind of man that makes of me."

"What if you can't save me? What if I have to die to stop this?"

"That's not an option." "What if it is?" she challenges. "And what if I'd rather that than the alternative? How many souls damned is worth my existence? If that's the choice, if the choice is prolonging this to protect me or ending it sooner by letting me go, I know what I must choose. If the cost of my survival is the destruction of everything I built, I know what I would rather."

"No. I'm sorry, but no. You're tired. I know. I am too. For awhile, all I wanted was to stop fighting. I didn't care about the world or its people. I just wanted to break my oaths and abandon my duty and go somewhere warm. Somewhere I didn't have to fight and kill and watch men die beside me. But then you happened. We happened. We've changed each other, y'know."

"I know."

"And now everything is different. Especially me." He says, "It's not enough to claim some small corner and just exist. So if we have to rebuild, we will. If it all goes to ash, you'll rise up again. I'll help you. If you're the mother, then I'm the father, and I'll help you rebuild. I will help you create."

"Jon," she whines, shaking her head. Her body pushes away from the support of the headboard, looking to collapse. He catches her. Won't let her lie down yet. Needs her to meet his eyes. He's holding her face, propping her up where she might fall, steady and intense through her despair. "But it hasn't gone to ash yet, Dany. We're not done fighting. We haven't lost."

She slips from his grasp, sinking to lay herself in his lap.

Night's Watch, a force of thousands, made up of wildlings and Windblown and Unsullied and Vale knights, race down the line to Eastwatch. They hold off the invasion with their last breaths, slowing
down the slow march of death through the broken pass of the Wall. Viserion burns rows of blue fire around them to herd them instead of just incinerating them, so the undead may slaughter them and they may be risen. It gives them a fighting chance. But it's not enough.

An army of Northmen and Riverlanders ride hard as reinforcements, bringing ballista wagons and archers and trebuchets loaded with wildfire canisters to combat the dragon and his horde. Auxiliary divisions set blockades ahead in their path, one after the other, traps and caches so that the dead cannot cross.

"Lord Waters," she greets the day after she returns from Dragonstone, summoning the blacksmith.

"I'm no lord, Your Grace."

It's simply a sign of respect, a habit that slips off her tongue frequently, casually, and she has no patience for all these people around her thinking it matters anymore, lord or lowborn. She ignores his protest, beckons with a soft dip of her chin and wave of her fingers for him to step forward. Arya's friend lays his project on the table between them and refuses to meet her eyes.

The spear is a beautiful thing, shining black gemstone on one end, new steel on the other, a messy blend at the middle where they're fused. He explains to her and Jon why the tip has to be traditional steel, because the dragonglass is too fragile, shatters too easily, so it will not pierce a dragon's hide. But steel will do nothing against her undead child, so an amalgamation is required.

What they'd been forging before, dragonglass projectiles to be slung from bolt throwers to pierce White Walkers past their horde, would not suffice.

Jon got the smith and the dozens of his brethren working on weapons that might fell a wight dragon the very night Bran delivered the news. It's taken this long to perfect the process into a success. Now they have ammunition to load the ballistae to defend against Viserion. Half a hundred so far.

Half a hundred chances to slay a dragon.

In the Field of Fire, it took three shots of that crude bolt thrower to catch Drogon and nearly fell a queen and her dragon. But Drogon is not a wight, and Daenerys is not the Night King. She may have magic in her blood, but he wields power none have known in millennia.

Slowly but surely, they wade through their armies, pushing closer and closer, sacrificing whatever corpses they need to break the blockades, rising ever more dead men to replace the burned.

Each side is barely breaking even.

Every time Jon feels compelled to ride out, she fights him. He should be leading the charge. He should be out there killing his way to the Night King. He's Lord Commander of the Night's Watch. He's king. He needs to be in the field, he demands. And she says, "You go, I go."

It's not the same. If he goes out and dies, he's just one man. If she goes out and Drogon falls, the Night King commands two dragons.

Daenerys doesn't care. "You go … I go."

She remembers Tyrion's words. *You cannot afford to love this man. We all face the consequences of your decisions.* And she knows that is an unforgivable failure of their queen, but she cannot change it.

If he expects to keep her from the frontline, because she's too valuable, because she's their greatest
liability before she's their greatest asset, then she will remind him of the same. He is too important. If he falls, she will fall with him, and no one will be left to lead them, to continue this fight through Dawn.

So he makes differences where he can.

Viserion lays waste to northern keeps as the Night King's army marches inevitably towards Winterfell. Last Hearth is the first to fall, but soon they spread wide. Karhold on the eastern, Deepwood Motte on the far western, finally the Dreadfort, nearer to Winterfell than anyone ever imagined they could get. Killing, increasing numbers, then burning down the structures in their wake. Leaving an endless wasteland, nowhere for respite. Thousands of soldiers fall simply trying to slow them down. They've barely held them up enough to buy time for as many people as possible to run south. Ships flooding from every harbor for refuge in Essos, millions trekking desperately on foot to get past the Riverlands to the Reach and Dorne when they hear what's coming.

Every new report that comes in strains at her control. And his. Every defeat draws her nearer to mounting Drogon and getting out there to support their men.

When the Dreadfort falls, they find themselves at some sort of stalemate. Because they don't understand the creatures they fight, they cannot begin to predict their choices, or why the Night King does what he does. All they know is when the latest blockade is crushed and the Dreadfort to their east is taken, the undead advance falters. They don't know why, they don't know what for, but the Night King waits.

He doesn't notice the queen is feeling unwell. She's too good at hiding herself, and he's too preoccupied with the war efforts backsliding downhill, killing all their hope. Then one day, she sways a little to the side. Sansa is nearest, the only one without her head down, the only one actually paying attention. She catches her elbow to steady the woman, and that would be that, but then she tries to take the cup from her hand before it slips. Instead she jerks back, a sudden exclamation of pain pulling everyone around.

The cup clatters to the floor and they all glance at the redhead's hand, knuckles red like they've been scalded with hot water. Where the queen's fingers had touched her. "What was that?"

"Forgive me," Dany murmurs, dazed, drawing back. She starts to turn towards the door but falters. Stumbles. He's already moving forward when she collapses.

Jon lunges that last bit and collides with her before she's down, going with her so she spills across his lap rather than hit the floor. Her eyes are half open but she's unseeing. She's shaking. He goes to lay a hand on her face and hisses in pain, hovers it just shy, feeling the heat rise off her. She's burning up, like a literal fire beneath her skin. He throws his sister an urgent look, barks, "Get Sam." And she goes running. Then he's focused on the woman in his arms, trying to stir her, trying to keep her up as she quakes and splays boneless. "Hey, hey, c'mon. Dany, can you hear me?"

"Jon," she pants, half in a dream.

She's on fire. The world is on fire. It's wrong. It's so wrong. It's blue, and it hurts, burning like the flames have never burned her before. It's bright, but not the kind of brightness she's used to. It's a pure bright, a dark bright, like the way winter manages to be somehow bright yet offer no true light.
Daenerys drifts between fever dream and awareness. Voices come in and out of focus. Jon's voice. Her body burns, sweats, intense waves of fevers and chills shuddering through her, cramping in her joints and aching in her bones. Her fingers clench in sheets as she writhes in bed for days. Sometimes, she knows where she is, she knows she's sick. And then she doesn't. All she knows is the fire, the snow, the charred bodies and the blackened debris she walks through. A ghost in a graveyard.

Queen of a dead land. Queen of Death.

Under a sunless sky, she climbs painstakingly through a mountain of ice, cresting the hill that threatens to swallow her. She stands at the top and looks out over a field of frozen carnage. Decay. Everyone is dead, bodies on the ground, but some of them are still moving. They're getting laboriously to their feet, exposed bones creaking, dead flesh flaking off. They sway in place, a horde of corpses, looking to her. Waiting.

She's never been here before, but somehow she knows. To the west lies leagues of barren woods and hills to Winterfell. To the east, she sees the ocean. It churns and roars, brewing an endless storm. Growing colder and colder.

Now she knows what's been happening. She understands, as if she's part of it, as if she's a piece of Mother Nature, a shadow, a reflection. Mother Nature, like a mother, both nurturing and destructive. Protective and volatile. The storms are just the waters fighting that unnatural ice trying to take them, clashing against it with whatever surges it can muster. But the heat will not win.

Through the sky, the wraith of her gentlest child soars over. She spins with his arc, calling for him, and he swoops around, diving with a strangled screech. The frozen earth cracks open under the impact of his weight. Daenerys staggers, falls to her knees, just missing the stream of blue flame he breathes at her. Viserion shifts, crawling toward her on disjointed legs and torn wings, and the crack widens, splintering outward in a web of thousands. Dead men disappear from the crumbling surface.

Fear chokes her, trembling wildly through her body, but Daenerys still pushes up again and reaches heartbrokenly for her child. She touches his rotting hide and feels the ice sink into her bones. Crystals of it crawl up her arm, turning her blue.

"I'm so sorry, my love," she whispers, ignoring the pain, refusing to pull away.

The iridescent blue of his new eyes stares back at her, empty of everything he was before, full of something new. Something awful and unrecognizable. Something unnatural. She tries to push through to him from that faint broken thread of connection, that weaker strand of her link with Drogon, but all she finds is rot.

And then he burns her. Buries her under that blue fire as she screams. Agony like she's never imagined sears across her every nerve. Down to her soul.

When she pulls herself out, she's crawling, leaving blood and ash and embers in the snow, her gown peeling away. She's gasping and shuddering and smoke rises skyward. She looks up and finds him there, standing over her, waiting for her to crawl to him. She finds herself face to face again with the monster that's haunted her all this time. She tries to shove to her feet and fight, but she falls.

The Night King closes his frozen hands around her neck and lifts her to meet him. His touch burns differently than Viserion's fire. It's ice and killing, that touch, spreading like a disease down to the rest of her body. She can't move. She can't breathe. She feels it filling her up. Taking her over. **Changing** her.
Nothing in his eyes, nothing but death and desolation and ending, he leans in and presses the solid ice over his mouth onto her lips. Sucking slowly out of her every bit of warmth she has left. Consuming her soul.

Somewhere in the distance, a wolf howls.

"Burn her," Bran tells him.

"What?!"

"Burn her," his brother insists, eerily calm under her ravaged screams as the queen thrashes and fights the hands holding her down, protecting her from herself. "He's using her link with her dragon to reach her. He tricked her into opening up to him and now she can't get him out. She's trying to resist him, but she needs help."

"Can't you help her?"

"The last time I faced him, he nearly gained control of the Three-Eyed Raven."

He won't pretend to understand how a fire could possibly help her, but his brother has been right about everything he's seen so far, so the king obeys. With no other idea how to stop this, to save Dany, he grabs onto blind faith. They build a great pyre outside the walls of Winterfell, in the snow covered field. When it's ready, when she subsides back to shivering and convulsing, he lifts the queen into his arms and carries her out.

It won't hurt her, Jon tells himself. Over and over. It won't hurt her. He lays her gently to the snow at the heart of the pyre and hesitates. It won't hurt her. The old burn scar on his palm skims her wet brow, fingers stroking her matted hair back, ignoring the sear of her through him. Bracing himself. But before he rises, he leans close and fiercely tells her, "You're stronger than he is. You're Daenerys fucking Stormborn."

At the edge of the pyre, he takes the waning torch from Qhono and digs it into the kindling before he can falter. Knowing it won't consume her. Remembering his brother's words.

Remind her of what she is, Jon. It's her only way out.

Heat licks at her skin. Smoke fills her lungs. Ice from below, flame from above. Something is wrong here. Daenerys comes alive again like waking from a paralyzing dream, thawing from where he'd frozen her. She opens her eyes and watches the world turn from that colorless graveyard to something bright and brilliant and thriving. Orange light all around her, dancing higher, scouring over the rot, melting the white. It infuses the cold stillness with motion and vibrancy. It infuses her.

The Night King endures, refusing to let go as the fire grows, surrounding them, blanketing, drawing to her like she's the air that feeds it. Caressing her in a painful kiss, but a good kind of pain, a life giving pain. To him, it hurts like something else. She can see it eat at him, test him, brand him, looking into those otherworldly blue eyes, those monster eyes. He doesn't burn away like his wights, but that orange light slicks across his lifeless blue body, changing.

His hands around her throat begin to weaken, begin to warm, the biting ice that gives them power sloughing away, bit by bit, layer by layer, magic dripping down. Beneath the ice is pale flesh, soft and vulnerable, sludge under it warming back to blood, coursing. She watches in mesmerized horror.
as the flames strip him down to his baser origins, to the man beneath, and the last piece left is the blackened wound over his heart.

Fire won't reach it.

She's not sure what compels her, but Daenerys finds her fingers rising to that black wound, pushing into the ice and rot as her hand feels like it's freezing solid, like it's freezing off. She doesn't scream, she doesn't run, she pushes in. Claws at it until she has his ruined heart in her palm, feeling beyond the excruciating cold that distinct bite of a shard of glass cutting in.

The bloom of her smile is mean and triumphant.

Revelation galvanizes her. Inexplicable certainty, a resolution, a purpose suddenly clear. The rage that sweeps over her out of the monster only makes her surer. He thrusts her away before she can rip it out and see for herself. But she knows.

Waking is like breaking the surface after drowning for so long underwater, but Daenerys surges up in the midst of a great blaze.

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Jon is on the ground by the time she emerges from the dying fire, naked and darkened with ash and smoke, hours later. On the hill behind him, all of Winterfell has found its way out for witness.

Getting to his feet, he shucks his cloak and crosses to her when she leaves behind the worst of the heat, wrapping it around her tight. As she hugs it to her, his fingers skim over her, finding her face, testing to see if the burn of it is still unbearable. She lays a hand over his, pressing it into her cheek before he can pull away. She's still shaky, so he doesn't need more than that invitation to hook his arms around her middle and hold her into his side, taking her weight, steadying her, ignoring the uncomfortable heat.

"Alright?"

"Fine," she murmurs, eyes a little unfocused. She doesn't look fine. She doesn't sound fine. But she forges ahead with him, trudging slowly towards the keep in the distance as their men work to douse the fire with snow in their wake before the sharp wind pushes it to the trees.

"Dany?"

"I'm fine, Jon. I'm..."

When she drifts off, when she seems out of reach, even held in his arms, he tightens his grip to pull her back. "What happened in there?"

"I think I know how we can end him."

"The Night King?"

"Yes. I think I saw what to do." She looks up at him then, glassy eyes finally fixing on him, finally seeing him. "Your brother said he was created by a piece of dragonglass. Children of the Forest used their magic to embed it in his heart. I think that's the only way to destroy him. You have to get it out. Somehow. We have to get the dragonglass out of him. We have to take his heart."

"Dany," he calls, urging for her focus. Any other day, even the suggestion of a solution to the Night King would cost all his attention. But there are more important things right now. He can't focus on
that until he has his answer. He asks again, "What happened, Dany? What did he do to you?"

She falters and their painstaking trek halts. "I'm not sure what he wants with me, but I think … I think he believes he can make me like him."

The unnamed dread that's been twisting him up since she first fainted starts to settle into something less bewildering. A much clearer fear. "Why would that matter? He wants the rest of your dragons, I'm sure, but what would it matter to him if you were one of them or just dead?"

"I don't know. I don't know why. I just feel like…"

"What?" he rasps.

Her bright eyes turn to meet his stare, shiny, bloodshot, suddenly gripped with an urgent desperation. She demands, "Promise me, Jon. Promise me that if I become one of them, if it seems like he's going to turn me, promise you'll stop it."

"I'm not gonna let him touch you."

"No. That's not what I mean. I need you to stop me."

"Daenerys?"

In a breathless rush, "I'm never going to be a slave again. Do you understand? That's never going to happen to me. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. But if we fail, if I fall, if I change, I need you to put me down."

"That's a heartless thing to ask," he says, but it's not a promise he needs to make. The idea hollows him out. It terrifies him. Paralyzes him. But if that ever happened to her, he'd never let her go on that way. He'd never do that to her. He'd make sure she was put to rest, somehow, if it was the last thing he ever did. But that won't happen. It won't. Because if it does, if that fucker ever touches her, it's because Jon's already dead.

"I'd do it for you."

"Aye," he sighs.

"I won't be his queen," she swears fiercely, catching his sleeve with bruised fingers when he tries to pull away from her. "I will not serve Death."

Tears track soot down her pale skin, pushed free by fear and debilitating despair she'd fought for so long to deny. All her life, she'd fought it, he knows. Holding to a belief in a better end than her beginning had been. Holding to the faith in herself and what she could overcome. He hates that it's failing her now, hates that fucking dead man for doing this to her, hates that he can't restore it for her. He comes back in close, pressing into her instead of withdrawing like lifelong instinct tells him to. He takes her face in his hands and drops his brow down to hers and just breathes.

She's about the only thing keeping his head above water.

If he fails her…

Everything is lost.

This was all for nothing.
Chapter 18

We've Come A Long Long Way Together

The queen's mind is still in her dreams, in a field of undying death, try as she may to leave it behind. When they return within the castle walls, Jon moves to lead her inside away from prying eyes, but her body resists him. It doesn't want to go in there. It's singed and seething. It wants to stay in the frigid wind, cooling under the snowfall. So he veers in another direction. He leads her instead through the gate to the Godswood within the keep walls. They walk slow and careful, but long enough for the bottoms of her feet to ache, bare on the frozen forest floor, before coming to a refuge.

A tranquil place, an otherworldly place, secluded and soothing. Three pools fed by the hot springs beneath Winterfell, the moss covered stone of the Guest House on one side, the sprawl of weirwood with their white bark and red leaf rainfall on the other. The dense canopy above blots out the already weak sunlight, leaving them shadowed. Steam drifts up from the pools in enticing whorls, ice around them half melted, a cycle of endless freezing and warming.

She's never been here before. She finds it … magnificent.

Jon treats her gently, as if she's been made fragile suddenly, as if he's worried he might push her over some edge if he touches her hard or says the wrong word. He takes his cloak from around her and urges her into the water. Soot runs down her as she wades deeper, turning her pale skin grey and muddy. He toes out of his boots and shrugs off the extra layers before he follows in after her, using the wetted bundle of his discarded tunic to stroke across the back of her shoulders. While he works at washing the ash off her, slowly, so slowly, a stifling silence settles.

His wariness turns her frustrated with herself, telling herself to lock it away, to be present now, to be Dany. But it's not that easy.

She wishes she'd brought the High Priestess west with her. She could use her voice weighing in on the speculations. She could use her counsel. She may not have agreed with everything Kinvara asserted or laid worship in the god her fire priestess served, but she can't deny the woman had a powerful grasp on the unknown. And among all else that she'd been aware, she's brutally reminded now that she herself is a piece of that. She doesn't understand herself, what she is, what magic drives her, how it connects her to things beyond the mental bond with her dragons. Kinvara had seemed so sure of whatever shrouded mystery Daenerys was born of.

Prophecy is a fickle thing, open to ever malleable interpretation. Daenerys never held weight to any of them. She's used people's beliefs in them to her benefit, but she's never been a believer, not in things so subjective. She is the prophesized one, so many would claim. The Stallion That Mounts The World. That's why the Dothraki bowed to her and joined together in the greatest khalasar there has ever been. Because they saw the signs, saw her as the one their legends spoke of. But she made that happen. It was no uncontrollable force orchestrating fate, no mysterious power behind it beyond the mystery of whatever allows her to survive the fire.

Dothraki say she'll conquer the world. The Lord of Light says she'll save it.

Variations of the same story, prophecies of every culture, from every far slung part of the world, all twining into essentially one destiny. The Prince That Was Promised. A thousand people have been attributed to them. A thousand ways to refute them.
These stories, it could be her. It could be Jon. It could be anybody. It could be all of them, pieces of a larger puzzle fitting together. Or it could be none.

It's not useful, prophecy.

But the magic… The magic is a different story.

Daenerys brought a kind of magic back to the world when she birthed her dragons. An old magic, a more potent magic. Suddenly every fire practitioner grew stronger. The warlocks of Qarth and the shadowbinders of Asshai sparked. Resurrection returned. Somehow she woke the dragon and with it came its power.

What she doesn't know is how. And she wonders now, remembering the feel of the Night King's icy hands on her throat, she wonders if she woke him too. Thousands of years, these monsters have languished north of the Wall. Then suddenly they grew strong and they started preparing for war. Was it her? Like the Undying that'd had no power until the day her dragons were born, like the Red sorcerers that could not see in the flames as clearly or pull dead men back to life before that day, did she cause this as well? Did she give the Night King's magic its strength back?

Is that what he wants with her? Whatever she is, whatever magic bore her and protects her from the fire, can it help him spread his disease?

What if you are the coming darkness?

She'd wondered that once. She'd worried. She'd been warned by that stranger Red Witch when she first came ashore on Dragonstone. And now it seems so many dire visions she'd dismissed are finding fruition. Even if she hadn't woken the White Walkers by birthing her dragons, she gave them Viserion. She set them free. She gave them everything they needed to destroy the living.

The Wall withstood eight thousand years, guarding the realm, holding the Others at bay. Eight thousand years before Daenerys Stormborn. And down it fell.

Jon wraps his arms around her, pressing her back into his chest, holding her tight. "There's gonna be an after, Dany, I promise. We've not come through all we each have survived for it to end this way."

Letting out a shuddering breath, she curls her fingers over his forearms and tries to find a reminder of her bravery in his hug, or at least some peace.

That's not something there's been much of at Winterfell. Not for her. Between the harshness of the weather and just how unwelcome she's been with his people, then the ghost of Viserion haunting her, the war turning on them, missing Jaeh like a hole torn through her stomach and bleeding.

The ill will from the northerners has only intensified as time goes on. Her advisors assured her she'd win them over, but the more they see of her, the more their disdain grows. "They will see what I see," Jon had swore, but it is not the case. She is merely an interloper to them, nothing to respect. They blame her solely for making the Night King into their enemy. Delivering to him her dragon and dooming their lands. She can't argue that.

All her talk of having come to save them. Of paving the way for a better future. Now she sits behind Winterfell's walls while her child burns through all those she dragged north to fight for her. She's never felt more the fraud.

"In this, our hands are tied," they all keep reminding her, but it doesn't change how she feels.

This is worse, in a way, than living amongst the masters. Because these are Jon's people, this is Jon's
home, and he seems to struggle with this inescapable instinct to respect them. Even as he's disgusted by them, he feels the urge to hold them up as something they're not. These are his father's people, and his father will always be this great man to live up to in his mind, and some of that gets rubbed off on his view of the rest of them. They've treated him like lesser all his life, like something to be ashamed of, to compensate for, leaving him with an old urge to please them, prove them wrong, earn their high regard. At the same time, she knows he sees them clearly, knows how disappointed he is in what they're showing themselves to be. But he'd wanted so badly for her to feel like this is home. He'd wanted it to be something it never would.

Perhaps that has something to do with why she doesn't want to go back inside the castle. She's just feeling so raw, as if someone has taken a scour and scrubbed off her skin, all her defenses, all her coping mechanisms, all her resolve, and she's left with an ugly snarled mess of emotions that are making her weak and confused. Doubt and defeat suddenly threaten to overwhelm her, as if the Night King's kiss stole her steel, doused her fire. She doesn't want to go in there with everybody looking at her, judging her, looking to her for answers.

"Can we stay here for awhile?" she whispers, dropping her head, resting her chin on his wrist. "I just want to stay here."

Jon vows, "We can be anywhere you wanna be."

In the great hall, the lord's table at the raised head has been turned into a complex war spread, smattered with the new marks of decimation at where they failed, where the dead passed, and all the locations they've held fast. The roads that've become impassable or they've closed off and the few that remain safe for transport. The ruins, the worst weather events, the fleet positions. The hall has become a war room populated by voices from every corner of the kingdoms. It's occupied day and night lately by one faction or another of councils and courts and strategizers.

Jon spends more time engrossed over this table than he does anywhere else.

Dany... Wherein any circumstance, Dany would be right here with him, would be here before her people, hearing every new piece of information that comes in, deciding on every development, poring into the midnight hours for solutions. But she has taken harder hits in this campaign. She hasn't been herself. And he's encouraged keeping her distracted, because she needs something to bolster her, not more hours spent obsessing over the apparent futility here as he has. He hasn't minded picking up the slack, taking over where she wouldn't normally leave off, taking reins farther across the undefined line of where his authorities end and hers begin.

It might be a blessing. The more she's faced with all these challenges, the more her restraint is tested about using Drogon, and he'd rather not add that strain to whatever it is she is going through inside herself now.

The lesson she's learned this last year has been extremely changing. She's not as infallible as she thought she was. She can't protect what's hers as she'd believed she could. Realizing that, accepting that, it's shifted something inside her. He hopes she can get back that fierce faith in herself and that indomitable idealism that'd galvanized so many of them that followed her, Jon included, but he's worried she won't.

Crown forces divided into garrisons form perimeters around Winterfell's region. Half the khalasar has ridden up from the Crossing to encamp with them, a cavalry at the frontline. Drogon circles, breathing giant bonfires alight to keep them from freezing out there in the ice fields. Trebuchets lining the keep's outer wall battlements, ballistae in every watchtower, patrols night and day. And
more weaponry still, stocked with the infantries, set on sledges and turntables, loaded into wagons, as mobile as they can make them. The surrounding moats have frozen solid, so the plans to spread oil across the surfaces and set them aflame should it come to that is made less feasible. Which means they must be prepared to retreat should Winterfell's walls be overtaken.

Those contingencies get prepped as best they can.

Meanwhile, too many lords are raising dissent, wanting to take the fight to them, to converge every banner and bit of fighters they have left and strike the Dreadfort with everything they've got. But the war generals and battle commanders he and Dany have corralled to the high council mostly agree with him that Winterfell is their best resource to wage a defense from. Besides, even if their enemy were normal men, a siege to that formidable fortress would be ill advised. And if they marched to assault, there's no way he could keep Dany and Drogon from joining the fight. Offensives have only cost them armies, strengthening their enemy’s numbers.

All things must be considered.

Bran says, "Winter is on their side." And he's right. The winds, the frost, the fog. It makes it impossible for the men to fight, for the bolt throwers to aim, for the blockades to see them coming. The soil has frozen so strong, they couldn't dig the trenches they needed. The sea's unrest has wreaked havoc.

In the most recent attempt, the Stormborn armada maneuvered shortboats up the rivers off the Dreadfort in a suicide mission to launch fire into their midst from waters where they can't reach. None but the dragon in the sky that's surely decimated them, because they've had no word since their boats launched from the galleys in the Narrow Sea. They'd equipped them with ballistae to uncover once they drew the dragon out and catch it unawares, but the odds were bad to begin with, so nobody is surprised to hear nothing. Too many plans and ambushes have turned to failure in this effort for any surprise.

"How much wildfire stock is left?" he needs to know.

"Excluding the caches already placed? Not enough, Your Grace."

Not enough. Not enough. Everything these days, it's never enough.

When she seeks out the Baratheon blacksmith, Daenerys comes to an abrupt halt in the doorway of his makeshift forge, startled to find him thrown to the ground, Arya pinning him. Her dagger at his throat, teeth bared, fuming with wildness.

"Arya!" she exclaims, scolding, before she has time to stop and really consider the situation or find out what's going on.

The girl backs off after a tense moment, chest heaving, cheeks flushed. But she shoves past her when the queen tries to talk, stalking away from them in thwarted hostility and muddled embarrassment. Normally, Daenerys would have the presence of mind and the impartiality to observe and interject with more precision, but she's found herself these days increasingly compromised, reacting emotionally, feeling unjustifiably tied to new people. In that respect, she empathizes with some of where the girl is coming from in her difficulties.

But now she also feels oddly protective of the eager smith.

Gendry gets to his feet easily, swiping blood from under his nose, apparently not that battered. "It's
alright, Your Grace," he says, blinking at her concerned expression, bewildered. "It's not how it looks."

"Isn't it? It looked like she was about to open your throat."

"Nah. I just never learnt to shut my mouth and she's gotten a lot deadlier is all. Used to be, took all she had to just shove me over. She was so scrawny, all that surly mood seemed kinda funny. Now she's bigger, gotten stronger, and I guess the nasty temper grew with her."

He seems half amused, chagrinned perhaps. Not frightened, irritated, or slighted in the least. They are an odd pair.

"I hate to blame the victim, but for your own welfare, try to avoid provoking her next time, yes?" she finds herself saying, not sure what to think of all this.

When he grins, he's got red in his teeth. "Oh, no. Can't do that, Your Grace. This is our whole dynamic." Then he sobers at the worry in her eyes. "She'll forgive me eventually. I know it. I know her."

"I don't think it's really about you," Daenerys surmises. Jon's little sister is in a transitional period. She's having a hard time assimilating all her feelings.

"When you see her, will you tell her…" After he trails off, he turns to look about his workspace and scratch at the back of his head, sticking his already haphazard hair up in endearing spikes. "Tell her I didn't mean what I said."

The queen's almost out the door when she hesitates, remembering why she'd sought him out to begin with. Angling back, hands clasped in front of her, she says, "Qhono said you had an idea you'd like to discuss with me?"

"Oh. Right. Um…" Gendry rifles around the small desk in the corner before finding the torn parchment he's looking for. Bringing it forward, a wrinkled soot smudged sketch of various designs. "I was thinking about a shield. For your dragon, y'know. Some type of armor that could be fashioned to latch around his more important bits, help you two have a better chance in the sky when spears start flying."

Intrigued, she encourages, "I'm listening."

"The problem is, anything thick enough to protect him, because he's so huge and it'd have to span so much, would be unmanageably heavy. Not just a concern for the construction or carting around part, but if it weighs him down or slows him or makes him less mobile in the air, it'd be more trouble than it's worth, I'm thinking. I'm still trying to find the right metal, what could be sturdy enough and lightweight. At least a guard around his heart. Don't have much time to work on it neither, since we all been busy trying to supply the frontlines."

"I wouldn't want a precaution like that prioritized over the necessity of arming the soldiers out there right now," she says.

"Sure, sure. But if I could figure it out, you think he'd cooperate for that?"

"Possibly. Drogon is … temperamental."

"Just to find the right design, I'd really need his measurements. And, well…"

Daenerys feels her lips pulling. "I would need to be there to ensure he behaves, but what exactly are
you asking me, Lord Waters? Are you wanting permission to take this task on yourself, are you hoping I'll do it myself, or should I find someone else brave enough to take their tape measure to Drogon's belly?"

"Just Gendry, Your Grace," he reminds again, ruffling his hair, feet shifting restlessly. "And I'd do it myself of course. If you'd permit... If you'd like... If you'd think I could wrangle my measure all around his crooks and crevices without turning myself to well done dinner. Do you think?"

"I can't tell if you're fearless or foolish," she mutters amusedly, thinking of all she's witnessed between him and Arya Stark, and how he'd handled being thrust into the middle of her Dothraki, and how he joked under the frightening scowl of Jon's perusal. "Very well. We'll see how he takes to it. But this had better not be some idiotic attempt to impress Lady Stark."

"The only way she'd be impressed is if he did roast me," he laments.

_No, you poor boy_, she thinks on her way out. _If Drogon hurt you, she'd take a spear at him._

Which is either a funny thought or absolutely terrifying. Because she can't decide, she puts it aside. Meaning to send a runner to search the keep for wherever Arya has hidden away, figuring she wouldn't want to be found, it becomes unnecessary when she comes upon her in her path, perched on the rail of an upper level walkway overlooking the courtyard. One knee bent to plant her foot on it, she's got her head down and her knife still out, chiseling the tip into the wood, carving something to distract herself. She pretends to not be waiting for her, but only halfheartedly.

Daenerys leans beside her perch without a word.

After awhile, Arya sets her knife down and runs those fingers oddly down the indented fur maze of the queen's white coat sleeve. Focusing on that instead of looking up into her eyes. Begins in a subdued voice, "I thought my time in Braavos taught me to be calm. To be..."

"Stoic?"

"Yeah," Arya sighs. "But now that I'm back here, I'm surrounded by all these old faces and I just keep screwing up."

"You're overwhelmed."

"Yeah, maybe, only a little," she concedes reluctantly.

"It's only natural, Arya. We're all still learning to adjust. This would be hard even without the high stress of our current situation. Unimaginable stress. It takes its toll on us all, I assure you. Sometimes in ways we don't even recognize." She takes a beat to consider her next words, then cautiously ventures, "Have you thought of what you want out of your life? If there was no war to worry about, and your family was safe, and you had nothing holding you back, what would you want?"

"When I was little, I dreamed of being lots of things when I grew up. Adventurer, a knight, a king's councilor, High Septon. I wanted to be everything. _Do_ everything. _See_ everywhere. Sometimes, I just thought to run off into the woods and live with the wolves, because that's the only place I'd get to be who I really am. The only place to be free is out in the wild, isn't it? Otherwise, there's always someone telling you what you are and what you're not allowed to be. I wanted to build things. I wanted to lead. My father told me that wasn't possible. I was a girl and my destiny was to marry a lord or prince and bear his children and that was where my power would come from. I didn't want that. I wanted more than their rules could give me."

"And now?"
"Well, all that's pointless, isn't it? Look at what I've become. All I do is destroy."

"Building is still in your future, Arya. And leading. So long as you choose it." Then, seeing her words aren't taken to heart, she adds, "To build up almost always requires some form of destruction first, whether that's killing the men that stood in your way or letting go of the past to make peace with your enemies."

The girl doesn't answer, avoiding the issue, avoiding facing her, so Daenerys gently catches her hand where it's still straying in distraction. Her fingers press to Arya's scabbed knuckles and her thumb finds the heart of her calloused palm. It gets her to look up and meet her gaze at last. With an uncharacteristic tentativeness, she says, "There's something I've been meaning to give you, but I worry you'll take offense."

"And if you offend me, I might have you whipped?" the queen jokes.

Her free hand slips into her pocket and Arya pulls out a gold chain. It uncoils and a heavy medallion swings at its end. Daenerys lets go her to take it, examining the rich intricate etching on the medallion's face. She runs her fingertips over the divots in the gold, admiring the labor of it. And the idea behind it. The three heads of the Targaryen dragon, the Stark wolf at their heart.

"What is this for?"

"Just a reminder," the girl says. "You and Jaeh, you're part of my pack now. For always. I don't know if you'll like it, if you prefer your House sigil intact or you feel like this mars it. I know if I was marrying a man and they made me overlay his House on mine, I'd hate it. I'd bristle. But this is just … a symbol." She takes a refreshing breath, shoulders lifting as she leaves her previous wallow of doubt and self-hate. "A symbol of what I want to tell you. That you belong with us now. We're mismatched strays, the lot of us, but we're fit for each other, I think. You've been trying to tell us all that in your way and I just want you to know that I hear it. I agree. And I really hope…"

"You hope what I hope. For the future."

"Broadly," she qualifies. "I don't know about the details, not for me, not yet."

"We move forward together regardless, as much as we can."

"Yeah. Yeah, I hope so. I don't know how to do this, but I hope."

"We're stronger together, all of us," Daenerys promises, then hangs the chain around her neck. "I'm not offended. I'm not bristled. I don't hate it." Touching the medallion as it lays between her breasts, she smiles. "This is important."

"Gendry helped. Taught me how. Something embroidered would've been simpler, but I'm shit at needlepoint. It's why I named my blade Needle, you know. Because it would be all I'd ever stitch with."

"He says he didn't mean it, whatever he did to upset you."

"Oh, he meant it. But it doesn't matter. I didn't intend to react like that."

"Would you like to talk about it?" she offers.

"No."

"Very well."
But then Arya adds, "He brought up Braavos. He wanted to know about my years there. And when I told him… Well, we didn't agree on things."

Daenerys parts her lips to reply, but just then she snags on an indecipherable blue gaze. Sansa sees them from below while crossing the courtyard and changes course, ascending the stairs. When Sansa joins them, she can't help but notice the way Arya's demeanor shifts into a whole new person, stiffening, withdrawing behind her impassive assassin's mask. "I love my sister," she'd once confided in the hushed dark, and those words come back to the queen now, "but I don't think I like her. And I'm not always sure we can trust her."

"What were you discussing so depressively?" the redhead inquires.

"Braavos," Arya says simply, no emotion left in her tone. Guarded blue eyes swing from the brunette to Daenerys, regarding her with an obviously discomforted caution. But whatever fear lurks beneath the surface, her chin is sharp and lifted, and her voice is cool and confident when she declares, "Another disastrous political move that's making its lasting effects known to us." There's no caution in that accusation, is there? It seems her mouth has run away with her, a clipped but fiery irritation. "Perhaps they will combine, your Braavosi victims and the offended northern exiles and Lannister loyalists, all under the guiding hand of Lord Baelish. Then we shall really have something to worry about."

"That's not what we were talking about," Arya snaps, before her focus swerves, "And Northmen willing to work with Lannisters? When that day comes, they'll have well and truly proven just what bottom feeders those who ran always were, all their bluster full of hot air." Carried on her scorn for the deserters, her aim lands on her sister, possibly unintentionally. "As for Littlefinger, if you'd taken care of that worm when you had him creeping at your side all that time, he wouldn't be a threat now."

The flash of hurt that flickers through Sansa's pale perfect face makes regret settle heavy in Arya's stomach, written across her rounder features plainly. She draws back, looking like an apology is stuck at the tip of her tongue but she can't figure out how to put it out.

Sansa doesn't give her the chance anyway, lashing back, "How should I have taken care of him exactly? Slit his throat in his sleep? Is that what you do to everyone you don't like, Arya? For whatever he's done, Lord Baelish is the one that saved me. While the rest of you had each other or friends and protectors, no one bothered to come looking for me, did they? No one tried trading for my life."

"Lady Brienne came for you," her sister contradicts. "Podrick said you turned her away. You'd rather Littlefinger's company."

"She was a stranger, sent by a Lannister. All she looked to me was a woman playing dress-up in knight's armor. How was I to know she wasn't lying? He was the one that thought of me, watched out for me. He spirited me out of King's Landing, away from Joffrey and Cersei. He spared me from Aunt Lysa's violent jealousy. And when we needed him, even though I hated him, when I asked, he brought me the full force of the Vale to save Jon in the Battle of the Bastards and retake Winterfell."

"He sold you to the Boltons."

"No. He arranged it, he presented me with the choice, and certainly he talked me around to it, but it was my decision. My stupid mistake. He convinced me it was my best way to get home, to get Winterfell back, the first step in some brilliant plan. I didn't know it would be intolerable. Maybe if Ramsay hadn't been such a shortsighted sadist, it would've worked."
"You can't honestly blame yourself for the situation you were found in," Daenerys gently wonders.

"Why not? I could've said no. I could've stayed in the Eyrie."

"You were a young girl being manipulated by a clever old man. You had no allies to trust and a great desire to reclaim what was stolen from you. There's nothing wrong with that. Lord Baelish had the power to protect you or exploit you. Ramsay Bolton had the power to honor you or abuse you. Those were their decisions, not yours. There is no blame for you in that."

Those words seem to do a little for soothing her tumult, smoothing her bristled fur back down. Only with Sansa Stark, unlike Arya, it feels more like shards of cold broken glass than it does the sticky warm blood and mud in a wounded animal's pelt. She watches Sansa soften under her attention, her sympathetic surety, in surprise and with much hesitance, distrust in her eyes diluting a little more.

From personal experience, she knows all too well what a long way the simple fact of having someone see your side of things goes, how good a balm it can feel to the prickled infected injuries of a girl's insides just to have someone see you and acknowledge all you've endured. To say it's not your fault, that you did your best, that they understand. It's what Arya so desperately needed. Evidently, it's what Sansa needs as well. She knows they could be that for each other better than any outsider could, but the sisters are younger than either thinks of herself and too preoccupied with their own trials to look past the gap and see their sister.

"Still," Arya mutters. The words she leaves unsaid are grudging and ungracious. *It's not what I would've done. I would've known better.*

"Frustration tempts us all to turn on each other," Daenerys tells them, effectively silencing both girls. Feeling Missandei strongly, recalling years of late nights and the calm cadence of her opinions on life washing over her like the flow of a sweet river. Men like Tyrion never stop talking about how clever they are, but Missandei of Naath is probably the wisest person she's ever known. "It is too easy to fall into tearing at those closest to us, but we can't succumb. We must lean on each other now."

Wishing to help the sisters away from fighting, of blaming each other for all their old wounds, Daenerys knows she can't. That's up to them, to find a way to settle their differences and let go of resentment and reach a content place in their complicated relationship. What she can do now is steer them away from their bitterness toward each other and catch their minds on less intimate conflicts.

"As for my political disasters," she begins, "Braavos made me their enemy, not the other way around. I could not let that lie, or else others that hoped to test me would take it for encouragement. They had to be made an example of. Though it's true that I failed in my methods, because I was emotionally compromised at the time. I've learned from that mistake. Going forward, I will never let that happen again."

Highly skeptical, Sansa challenges, "You'll never seek vengeance again?"

"I will never meet a combatant army in the field and condemn good men to their deaths just for doing their duty if I can find my victory some other way," she explains. Then, "The more power you hold, the higher the stakes of your every choice. It makes your failures so much graver than everyone else's."

"But why would they have stood against you unless you wronged them first?" she argues. "Braavos was a truly free city. It's what they were founded on. Braavos was built by escaped slaves and helped others be free of the Valyrian Freehold."

"Yes, they were, weren't they? But that was thousands of years ago. In the present, of course they
still shouted loud about that integrity. They took no part in it, they claimed, and they loved claiming that. When slavers would try to stop in their ports, the First Sword would confiscate the ship and set the slaves loose. Very commendable. And yet," she turns course, "as the true abolitionist movement gained ground, they proved just how much they'd been profiting off the slave trade for centuries now."

Arya frowns. "I never saw slaves in the city."

"No, you wouldn't, but that doesn't matter in the end. While claiming the high ground, they were reaping the benefits of a booming economy from the flourish of a banking system held up by slaves and trading with slaving cities."

Sansa tries, "But that's not the same thi—"

Impatiently, Daenerys pushes on, "Braavos was the strongest and richest of the Free Cities because it was home to the Iron Bank, a vast institution that was greatly propped by slavery. Braavos loved their moral high ground, yes, but their commerce was nearly as dependent on it as the slaving cities. The bulk of their imports come from the sister cities, and who do you think produced those goods? And their exports, how do you think their purchasers amassed such wealth in the first place? You can never truly trust a man's word or a politician's theater," she reminds them. "You must account for every action."

She expects an argument still, more uninformed condemnation from Sansa like she's gotten from others that prove inclined to make her out a villain. Instead, the younger woman listens, seeming surprisingly attentive, as if she's absorbing, adding to her store of useful knowledge to help her in her governance. The expression on her face quells whatever annoyance had risen up in the queen.

"Some people will follow you because they love you. Some will see your kindness as weakness and try to hurt you for it. Let them fear you, men will say. And it is true that if they fear you, they'll follow you. So long as that's all you need. If you want loyalty, that takes much more than fear. It's a fine balance. I won't say I've mastered it yet."

"You have," Arya asserts. "Westeros may not know it yet, but I've walked among your Essosi. They love you, they fear you, they have faith in you."

_I pray so_, Daenerys thinks.

At the end of the night on a particularly long day, the king and queen wind up sprawled around a fire with what's left of the high commanders at Winterfell, drinking, relaxing, brainstorming. And arguing. Always arguing.

"First step to anything is getting Viserion out of the sky," he cuts in at last, steering them away from the more useless bickering. "Then we can try for the Night King."

It's been an endless debate, ever at the forefront of strategizing. To trap the Night King, to bait him, to ambush him, to isolate him, to carve the heart right out of him, dragonglass and all. They've no idea what the magic that animates him will allow, whether it's even possible or some unseen and unconquerable force will prevent it. They can't agree on their methods, or even all their options, and the monarchs would be the deciding votes of course, but Jon finds himself debilitated by indecisiveness when it comes to this. And Dany, always loud and clear and paving the way forward no matter the odds, well, she's kept silent.
Every attempt so far has proven futile. The Night King won’t be drawn out. He’s seen through every ploy. Even with Bran trying to guide them, they can’t seem to outmaneuver him enough to come out ahead. Though Bran hasn’t been as helpful as they anticipated, because the Night King has some way of interfering with his visions when his mind’s eye strays too close. If they could only find the right enticement, whatever it is important enough to tempt him into their snare, they could bring the dead dragon down and swarm the king and…

It’s no use. That’d require knowing the heart of a man. And he’s no man at all, is he? Experimenting with the wight did no good, gave them no further insight, Gods know.

Most have taken leave this late into the night, leaving just Grey Worm, Missandei between him and Dany, Qhono across the fire, Davos looking shorter than usual beside him, Greysteel Hightower, Captain Belmore, the wildling chieftain Barik, and Lady Trianna. Trianna, commander of the Volantis battalions, with her odd behavior and her striking markings. Tattoos across her face, a tear under one eye for when she was a bedslave, jade green tiger stripes down her cheeks for when she became a soldier. She was stationed with her men in the Rills until the main horde closed in and they called more banners north to Winterfell.

“So we can’t let the dragons dance,” she says, “but we can’t get to him past his hordes without one. If we load an elite unit onto Drogon with the gear they need, he could do a fast passover and drop them where they need to be without much—”

“Risk? Taking him anywhere near there is too much risk.” Hightower plants a hand on his knee, ignoring the eager nods and murmurs of agreement from Qhono and Barik at her suggestion. “That’s how we got into this mess to begin with. The queen took a risk with her dragons and look where it got us. You wanna do that again?”

“One stray spear, that is all it takes,” Grey Worm warns.

“And then we have two dragons to endure,” Missandei finishes.

“How long are we gonna pretend that risk is in any way avoidable?” Belmore demands. “The day will come, we all know it, so hiding him here until then is just leaving more to die. Not to mention prolonging this war unnecessarily.”

“Both of these things are true,” Grey Worm grants, deeply troubled by the latter. “Unavoidable, likely. Sending Great Drogon and Daenerys Stormborn into field too soon could make difference in triumph or the end.”

“And you know now is too soon how?” Barik growls.

Missandei lays a soothing hand on the rigid Unsullied's shoulder, speaking towards the others, “When he is at his full strength, in his stronghold, surrounded by hundreds of his lieutenants, any one of which could fell Drogon … no, it is not the time.”

Which is where Jon feels compelled to declare, “If it can’t be avoided, it's certainly not happening before we’ve weakened them. When they’re scattered, when they’re preoccupied, when they’re beset from all sides, then we'll see.” And the others erupt in further arguing, so he says, “We’ve talked this particularly issue to death,” and dismisses them.

He has much to consider and no interest in devolving endlessly into the same circular debate. Nor does he want Dany hearing all her own pleas from their mouths, wearing on her resolve. They can’t protect everybody. They sacrifice that in order to save the many. It’s down to the big picture now.
Despite the push to drive civilians out of the path of danger, there remains pockets of people stranded by impassable terrain, harsh weather, or resources diverted elsewhere, or just those still waiting their turn in line. And those that've stubbornly refused. The Vale resisted the worst of the northerners against deserting their land. They'd wanted to hole up in their holdfast, expecting the harsh mountains to keep the dangers at bay.

"The Eyrie is impregnable," Lord Royce had boasted.

Jon argued, "Nothing is impregnable with dragons in the sky."

But they are stretched too thin. For those that choose to defy the northern king and southern queen's word, they can't afford to respond.

Dany sets her feet up in Jon's lap once the room empties. He wraps his fingers over her ankle and digs his thumb into her arch, staring into the fire. He's trying to avoid fixating on the problem in mind, because he wants to enjoy the peace she's holding tonight. She's been swinging from vivid moods, clutched by deeply felt despair and dread, broken between the times she escapes it, lifting into a quiet gratefulness, an appreciation for all the good she's found. She holds great happiness in one hand, unimaginable devastation in the other.

He knows the feeling.

She's in the Library Tower when the sickness strikes her again, swaying on her feet, book falling from her hands. Dizzy and nauseous, Daenerys pitches forward, catches at the rail of the spiral stonework staircase. It's Missandei's quickness that spares her humiliation, gripping her hand, her elbow, whirling her around and back up the steps toward a pot in the reading nest she'd just left. She reaches it narrowly in time, bent over, heaving out her last meal. Her friend pulls the locks loosed from her braids from the way and murmurs soothing nonsense until it passes.

"Is it him?" she wonders, while Daenerys straightens and smoothes her dress and takes the cloth the woman offers to wipe her face, trying to reclaim some measure of dignity.

Winded, shaky, she says grimly, "I've closed myself to Viserion, but his rot must still be making me sick. I can feel the monster with him under my skin." When her friend leads her to a seat to rest, she looks down at their hands still clasped, her pale fingers aching as they clench so desperately around their darker counterpart. She can't help but whisper, "You should return to Naath."

Missandei looks startled. Confused. "I … do not understand."

Her voice strengthens. "Go home. Reclaim all that was taken from you when those more mortal monsters stole you to their slave ship. Take Grey Worm with you."

"He would never abandon his command."

"He would if you asked. He would for you. Take all the Unsullied and the freed fighters. Be safe. Be happy. This isn't your fight."

The confusion fades away, in its place comes a grave knowing. Missandei looks down at her for a long moment, studying her, deliberating, and then she crouches in front of the chair. She covers their clasped hands with her free one and lays them in the queen's lap, holding fast. "You know that I do not speak of my past."

"As I don't mine."
"It is for all the reasons you imagine," she says, "but also another."

"Go on," she encourages with gentleness.

"They took me when I was young enough that it was difficult to preserve those early memories of
my life before. Made more difficult by the ministrations of my masters. It was a business, and in their
business practices, an important task was to strip us of our cultures. Every memory we might've held
onto of our homes and our peoples. If we had family left behind, if we had something to go back to,
it needed to be scoured away. It wouldn't do to have something to cling to. So I lost any reminder of
where I was born and who I was. They beat me if I spoke my native tongue. They wanted me to
forget that I was anything but their property. They wanted me to be no one. To have nothing.
Nothing to remember, nothing to hope for, no home to go back to."

"Missandei," she murmurs, feeling the old rage kindling again in the pit of her stomach, that drive
first seeded and grown from the sights of the Lhazareen raids and the atrocities of Astapor.

"I have nothing to reclaim, because I have done so already," her friend insists, uncharacteristically
fervent in that. "Look forward, not back," she reminds her. Then she swears, "I will never leave you.
We belong together. All of us. We are family. We face this together, as in everything."

Tears tracking still down her cheeks, "I don't want you all to die in this strange land because of me."

Missandei shakes her head. "This is not you. You do not scare. You do not stand down. You are
Daenerys Stormborn. Where has your belief gone? You have let these enemies inside your head like
you have never allowed before. You do not accept defeat. You do not let the insurmountable threat
make you hesitate. Believe in yourself. Believe in us."

"I'm trying." She's trying so hard, but she can't get out from under this suffocating weight on her
chest that's telling her all is lost. She's buckling under the pressure and she can't stop it. She's doing
her best to not fall apart, but whatever she does, she can't seem to feel like herself again. Fiercely,
chin lifting, she commands, "If I send you away, you will go."

"Yes, my queen." Then the woman raises her briefly bowed head and levels Daenerys with an
imploring stare, a strong stare. "But please do not."

They stand side by side at the rail, watching over the courtyard below. He knows it doesn't matter
that he hasn't found the right words yet, he has to give her something when Arya admits into the
pregnant quiet between them, "I don't feel like I belong here anymore." He turns to her, but she stays
fixed ahead. "Out there, with the soldiers, with the killers, yes. But in here, with family? I don't
know. It's not how I thought it would be. I'm not how I thought I would be. When all this is over and
the world isn't ending, I'm not sure how to be … me."

"You belong with us, whoever you choose to be."

"You don't know my thoughts."

Jon says, "I've an idea of them. I've heard some of what you're struggling with."

"Should've known she'd run to you," she mutters, not really bothered. "I told her she was one of us
now, that I wanted us all to stick together, and I do. But what if that's a mistake? What if I'm being
stupid and selfish and lying to myself? Jon… What if it's best that I go my own way?"

"I know murdering. I've killed—" His voice strangles off. Looking at Arya's unreadable face,
searching her dark eyes for the truth, for all the things she can't say to him for some reason. "Little sister, I've killed innocents, brothers, men I admired, friends. I've slaughtered more men than I can count. I've thrown wildfire into mobs. I've felt the bones of a man's face break under my fists and I didn't stop until I'd nearly pulverized him." On that intense rush of breath, he takes her by the shoulders when she would turn away, forcing her to look into his face as he does hers. In brutal honesty, without mask. "I don't care if you like the feel of your knife going into soft parts. If one of us is a monster, it's me. Not you. Not you, Arya."

"I don't like it," she whispers. "I just…" But all she ends up with is, "I don't know."

He misses the days they would talk over each other with the same words. When he would call her little sister and muss her hair and it would feel right. But those days are far behind them. Trying to cling to them is what is causing so much disquiet in her, he suspects. As it has him. "No matter how much we want to get back what we lost, it's all gone and it's not coming back. We're not who we were."

"That's the problem."

"But it's not. Arya, it's not. Things are different now, we're changed people, and that will take time to get used to in each other. But we're family, those of us with blood and those of us that've chosen each other. It's not a bad thing, it just is."

"I know it can't be the same. I'm just afraid it can't be at all. I'm afraid we're fooling ourselves. I've done that so many times and it's never ended well."

"Is that what you did with Gendry?" he asks.

The girl steps back to get out of his grasp, straightening tall, leaving behind the vulnerability and the smallness. She huffs a breath and says sharply, "Yeah. Yeah, I did. And he let me down. I'm not gonna let him do that to me again."

"How do you know he will? Seems to me he's learned from his mistakes. He's sure trying hard enough, following us here, going out of his way to be a great help in our efforts." And with a wry grin, "Taking all your abuse with more grace than any man I've ever known would."

"Would you mind your own business, brother?" she irritably retorts, turning to stalk down the walkway. "I don't see why everybody's taken to harassing me about this."

With a half smothered laugh, Jon chases after her.

She's passing by the small sept on her own when she hears the woman's murmured prayers in the unusual silence of the early morning. She should leave her to her privacy, not intrude on her worship, but something pulls Daenerys through the doors. She stands under the arch, observing her, only moving forward once her head raises and her chin tips invitingly. They find themselves sitting side by side in tense silence.

Until Sansa says, "You don't come in here. I assumed you weren't faithful."

"I have no faith in gods," she clarifies.

"My father built this place for my mother," Jon's sister reveals, gazing powerfully up at the art of the room. "To help with her homesickness." It's beautiful, dark, peaceful. Daenerys may see no value in religion, but she understands the appeal of this place. Faith or no, it feels like sanctuary. "I take
solace here because I feel them with me. Not the Seven. My parents.”

For the first time, Daenerys doesn't bite back the impulse to take her hand where it rests on the wood between them, fingers lacing, holding strong. Something passes through them then, Sansa's eyes turning to lock into hers, something changing. Another layer of ice breaking.

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Every day, it gets colder. Jon spends them out coordinating the different divisions of their host. Brigades that have never been brought together in history now suddenly are struggling to live together, work together, react in uniform when they couldn't be less alike in every way. Fighting to hold the barricade past Hornwood in the east and the Wolfswood to the northwest. They've withdrawn from any farther north, but the perimeter around Winterfell must endure.

The dead have left hordes from edge to edge, pushing down towards them from Deepwood Motte while the Night King and his largest horde still wait at the Dreadfort, brewing something. With the dead spreading through the forest, it's a quicksand campaign trying to thwart their advance. They've been using ballistae to attack the White Walkers from afar while infantry hacks futilely through the undead at the front, knowing the only way to win is to take down the commanders so their magic over their dead is cut. But in the forest, that's impossible.

He does his best to keep Dany away from the fray, to keep her and her dragon out of the enemy's reach. He does this by keeping her busy, keeping her productive in ways that'll make her feel fulfilled. Like flying Drogon southbound and back, escorting the supply trains that've had such hard times getting to them. Guarding from weather and raiders and sabotage. It's somewhat of a waste of her and Drogon's capabilities, but it's useful and it's enough to help her hold to her restraint, keeping their people from starving, bringing them the weapons necessary to forge on in this fight.

When his brother warns them of another disaster early enough, she'll use Drogon to get the survivors out, those that have refused to desert their homes or just haven't joined the exodus yet. The drowning swells of White Harbor, the deadly ice snap in the Vale foothills at Longbow Hall, the earthquakes that've been demolishing Cape Kraken, and the natural fires in the Westerlands.

He's done all he can, they've all done all they can to keep her from engaging in the northern battles, to keep her from risking herself and her dragon and all that will come of it if they lose them. But the western horde nearly reaches the treeline, and Bran assures him that the Night King is on the ground at the Dreadfort, so Jon pulls his men back and Dany arcs above the Wolfswood, setting it ablaze. Drogon soars, spinning and rising after every dive to breathe fire, just barely avoiding the ice spears that pierce the clouds.

In the aftermath, it's a devastating sight. Leagues of black and ash, that ancient wonderful living thing the Wolfswood was, reduced to ruin. Ash falls like snow in the air for weeks. He can't help but feel he's helping the dead spread their disease. But they do what they must.

It's not pretty. It's not pleasant. Surviving never is.

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When she's drawn from her dream, it takes Daenerys a moment to understand why she woke. The room is quiet and dark. Peaceful. In the hearth, the fire is almost all burned out. Ghost's heavy head is on her stomach, his massive body sprawled in the middle, leaving her to the side. But that's not it. Her face turns to the pillow, breathing in Jon's scent, searching for him in the emptiness. Her eyes find him in shadow, at the desk, too far away. His curls are loosed, making him look younger, softer, but the grim set of his expression says something else.
"Can't sleep?"

With a sigh, he stops writing. He sits back in his chair, contemplating his answer for a moment, deciding whether to be honest or reassuring, she knows. "Some nights, it's better if I don't."

Shifting onto her side, the wolf's chin ends up on her hip as she props her head onto her elbow. Rest has been a frightening thing to her for a long time, never more so than recently. But that's not what he's talking about. The Night King has no way to touch him yet, thankfully, and his dreams aren't prophetic. His Valyrian blood isn't strong enough for that. The demons he's talking about are only real to him. Softly, leaving room to dismiss her, she urges, "Tell me."

"It builds," Jon says, after awhile of coming around to the words. "This pressure in my chest builds up and it gets harder to breathe. Something heavy sitting on my chest that's getting heavier. I push it away and walk through it, but it keeps building. Every so often, it gets crushing. But that's not what worries me. I worry about what happens when it does, because the crush…" He fumbles for a way to explain it. "The crush isn't my chest caving in. The crush is my control. The binds on myself, you understand? If I lose those, I don't know what I become. I don't know what I'll do."

"You won't become anything," she assures. "You are what you are."

"No, Dany. You've seen me. You've seen what I'm like when I slip."

"You're talking about your anger. I understand. I have the same fear. A senseless pressure that terrifies me when it presses in. I'm not afraid of what my body will do when I break, but of the choices I might make. The orders I'll give that I won't be able to come back from. But that's not something that'll change you, Jon. You're a good person. It's natural to have that anger, after all that's happened to us, after everything we've been through over our lives, all the horror we've seen. Whatever power we gain or lose, we're still just people. There's only so much we're capable of bearing gracefully. If you break, you break. You'll come back together again. I know you will."

"I don't know that."

"I do," she insists, sitting up. "And if you ever can't, I'll do it for you."

"You shouldn't have to. That shouldn't be your responsibility."

"It's what I'm here for. You've done it for me. We'll do it for each other, yes?"

Jon's smile is a faint thing, fleeting, but deeply warmed while it lasts. "Yes."

There's awhile of comfortable silence as they both sit with that. Still, she's not satisfied. She wants him to know. To really know. She thinks he does, but she's not completely certain and she needs to be certain. Before it's too late, before they don't have any more nights like these, she needs him to know.

"The first man I loved in my life, the only man I loved before you," she begins slowly, precisely, choosing her words in difficulty, "was my khal. And that was… I was a child and it was one of the worst periods of my life. If I hadn't been strong willed enough, if I hadn't willed myself to love him, I wouldn't have survived. In those first months, I wanted so badly to give up. I laid in pain and crying every night, thinking about killing myself. But I refused to be defeated like that. I made myself stronger. I made myself determined. I turned it into an empowering experience, born from something ugly and unhealthy. When I loved him, when I made him be kind to me, I erased everything that came before. Everything I was, everything he did to me, they all did to me, it was pushed to the back of my mind, locked away. I was a khaleesi, a wife, I was going to be a mother. That's all that
mattered. And then he died, and my son died, and I had nothing. For a short time, I had nothing. Then I had my dragons and I had to keep going. I couldn't stop. I couldn't look back. If I did, all would be lost."

"You weren't relieved to be free of him?" Jon asks, and she can see that he struggles to understand that.

When she first told him about her life with the Dothraki, back in that meadow, she'd glossed over the harsher parts, the grittier truth, but she'd told him she was sold, she was treated unkindly, and she'd come to love her husband. Back then, he hadn't understood, and he still doesn't.

It's a hard thing to understand. She isn't sure if even she always does.

"When I say I loved him, it wasn't a lie I told myself. It was a truth I forced onto myself. If it wasn't true, if it wasn't real, it wouldn't have worked. I wouldn't have gotten through it. However it began, whatever it was made of, I loved him. I grieved for him as any wife would grieve her husband. But it was more than that. With his death, what little I'd ever known of safety died with him. It may have been warped, but for the first time, I was protected. I was cared for. I had sway."

"You were still a slave."

"Yes," she agrees. "But a better treated one than those around me. He would kill any man that tried to hurt me. He promised to take his khalasar across the sea and give me my home back. He was protection and revenge. I was young and all but powerless, so I endured the ugliness that came with that and I clung to it."

These aren't things she speaks of. These aren't things easy to think about.

"I'm not telling you this to make you angry—"

"I'm not angry," Jon is quick to reassure her. But then he reconsiders, "No, I am. Sometimes, I look at you and I wish I could bring them back, every man that ever hurt you that bad, just to gut them. No, that's selfish. That'd be for me. I'd rather be able to go back, go so far back, before anybody touched you, and take you away. I know you think everything you suffered made you strong, but I don't think so. I think you'd be the same woman in the end."

"It's a nice thought."

"It's a waste of time," he berates himself, turned brusque. "We should be looking forward like you said. We should always stay focused on the future, on fighting for one and building what we want out of the ashes."

"Right," she assents, edges of her lips curling as she watches him brood. Disturbing the sleeping wolf, she slides off the bed and moves to him. "Anyway, I didn't bring all that up just to make you want to kill something." She lays a hand to his shoulder, fingers digging in, forcing his rigid posture to relax, and pushes at his knee with one thigh, widening his seat. Then she twirls and falls smoothly across his lap, winding her arms around his neck as he grips her waist. "After Drogo died, I came to the conclusion that I would be alone. I was a dragon and I didn't need a husband. I didn't need someone to love."

"You're not just a dragon," he murmurs, looking distracted. "You're a woman."

"I'm your woman," she declares, echoes, her small smile becoming broad and bold and teasing. But she's serious. She's so serious. "I thought I would be alone. And all I'd known of love was twisted and uneven. Until you. I could never have envisioned a better man. Everything you are, I love. I
understand. Who you are, what you struggle with, how you’re trying to be. It was hard for me, as it was hard for you, but now that I’m certain, now that we’re certain … it’s so much more than I imagined."

The way he's looking at her, looking into her, is enough to leave her no doubt. It's enough to keep her from second guessing and feeling like an idiot, from feeling raw by the honesty, by laying herself bare. She can go to war and she can walk through fire and she can force sneering men to their knees, but being honest about things like this, exposing all the scarred confused parts of her insides, that's the hardest.

Being soft, being happy, being in love, comes with the greatest resistance.

"Whatever happens, I need you to know I love you. In a way I could never have loved anyone else."

"I'm glad we found each other,“ Jon swears, reassures, lifting a hand to run the pad of his thumb across her cheekbone. His bronze eyes burn, a mirror of intensity and emotion reflecting back to her, understanding her. His brow is drawn and his jaw is tight and his voice is a husky whisper promising her all the things he's already promised and all the things he can't bring himself to word. "If there was a particular god to thank for it, I'd be a devout man."

He won't word them, but she will. She won't avoid it. She won't give it that power. She twists her fingers into his wild black curls, her favorite thing to do, and holds onto him. She refuses to let the misery darken her savoring. "The world is ending and you make me happy. Happier than I've ever been. In the middle of my worst despair, the most terrified I've ever been, this is … the best period of my life. How insane is that?"

Jon just kisses her.
Chapter 19

The Silver Wedding

Before we die, I want you to be my wife, he thinks. Struggles to find a more romantic way to put it when he's feeling so futile. But she doesn't need words. She understands. She feels it too. Time is running out.

The living are as prepared for battle as they can be. There's nothing left to do but wait for the dead to make their move. Offensive campaigns out in the open have left them defeated. Their best chance now is to see if a defensive siege does them better. There's no more fitting a place for a last stand than Winterfell.

It's where winter fell once, isn't it? Why not once more?

When his siblings are told there's to be a wedding, Sansa brings out a ridiculously glorious gown and lays it before a stunned Dany. She says, "I've been working on this monstrosity for months. I know all of you look down your noses at propriety," with a long suffering glance across Jon, Dany, and Arya, "but it needs to befit the kind of queen you are. There's never been one like you before, so your gown should signify that."

"Months?"

"This is not shocking news, I'm afraid," she says dryly, but the way her eyes dart from the queen to the gown and back again tells him she's anxious for approval, a little bit of the girl she'd once been showing itself.

Dany runs a gentle hand over the flowering tiers of glimmering silver fabric and gives her a slow beautiful smile. Softly, sincerely, "Thank you, Sansa."

Once his family knows, all that's left is asking Samwell to marry them.

"Me? Marry you to a … a queen? The Dragon Queen! Jon, you're joking. I can't do that. I'm no septon. I'm not even a maester. I abandoned my training."

The king laughs. He's feeling lighter today than he has any right to. "It doesn't matter, Sam. All that matters is what it means to us."

And so they have a ceremony in the Godswood, simple and intimate, only a few close companions brought out to join them, though the whole of the keep ends up at the fringes, having heard. If she'd grown up in Westeros where she was supposed to, Dany would follow the Faith of the Seven, but she worships no one. And Jon's devotion to the Old Gods of the Forest is cursory at best. So their wedding becomes an informal thing, an amalgamation, eclectic like everything else about them and their people. A ceremonial celebration befitting the union of bastards and exiles and revolutionaries, of reluctant northerners and hopeful freedmen. Of dragons and wolves.

Under the blackening red leaves of the weirwood heart tree, on a blanket of snow, the handfasting goes by quickly. Samwell nervously oversees them through their vows, friends and family and loyalists surrounding them, but Jon can't take his eyes off her. In his wildest dreams, he'd never guessed his life would go this way. She lays a Targaryen cloak over his shoulders, pulling the clasp together at the base of his throat with a little grin, a private joke passing between them when she
lingers, looking up through her pale lashes. He wraps a Stark cloak around the queen.

His queen.

His wife.

"I wish Jaeh was here," comes her wistful murmur.

"So do I," Jon swears, then works to distract her, lingering in a deep kiss.

As Winterfell cheers, the childish joy that'd bubbled down inside him flows freely and he doesn't stop it. He locks his arms across the small of her back and hoists her out of the snow, pinned to his chest, laughing into each other's mouths.

"I long to spend our wedding night on Dragonstone," she admits, "with Jaehaerys."

"It's a long flight."

"So it will have to wait till morning," she determines, chin lifting at the decision, daring anyone to contradict. The trip has become ever more dangerous these days, both for those in the sky and the ones they leave behind.

"We won't be able to stay more than the day," he warns, regretful. "Not with the both of us gone."

"It's worth it. He's been missing you."

"Been missing him," Jon mutters, resting his jaw on her crown. "Little like I left a limb behind somehow."

"Exactly like that," she agrees. "I don't know really how much longer I can keep apart from him."

"We can't drag him here, Dany. He's better off where he is."

"I know, I know. But it's just…"

"Aye," he sighs.

The keep can't hold everyone, so they move to Winter Town for the reception. They were at first resistant, but encouraged by their advisors and their friends, guited about their people being excited, people needing something good to hold onto. Any reason to celebrate and remember why they're fighting. Remember what comes after winter and war. She knows how important it is to keep living through the fight for survival, to refuse to set the important things aside or lay life on hold. Keep living, keep spirits, take what you can and enjoy it while there's time.

Morale is as vital as a sword.

In the square, tables and benches have been pulled out of the row houses into a shambled festival, street packed with laughing and dancing, games and drink, fires roaring all around. Qhono and her kos have their hands full keeping the Dothraki from going too wild. Fights break out between foreigners and natives, but not as much as the drunken brawls between southerners and northerners. For today, they leave all that for others to worry about. They just savor the afterglow.
"Do you remember that party in the Riverlands?" Jon says, leaning into her ear, voice raised over the din. "On our way back to Castle Black?"

"Of course," she answers, but doesn't explain why, why she'd never forget that night because it's the clearest memory of Daenerys looking at his face in the firelight and being certain there was no going back, not for her.

How many years ago was it now? Nearly five?

It feels like a different world.

"Dance with me, like we did that night." His banded fingers stray down her arm to find her wrist, pulling her attention away from the spectacle she's captivated by across the square. Pulling her from her seat with him.

That night, he'd been shy and subdued, uncomfortable around the revelry, and she'd been the one to cajole him out from his shell, to force him up onto his feet and into the thick of the dancers. So tonight, she follows him gladly.

All around, their peoples are unfoundedly happy. Performers of all sorts wanting to please them, fire tracers and shadow casters, mingle through the mess once their acts are done, once the mountain of gifts have been given. A sea of bodies crushed, spinning and undulating against each other, most Westerosi too drunk and bawdy to notice, but quite a few still looking either aghast or amused at the Dothraki's harsh grinding or the freedmen's uninhibited sensuality and romance. Men drinking and laughing together until they throw punches. Women either warding off advances or chasing them. Children running wild.

This is all that is left of their peoples, all those that stayed, not pushed south or ferried east, just the soldiers, the fighters, those necessary to the war effort. The hardest sons of bitches, as Ser Davos would say, those that refused to run, but instead stuck through and determined in myriad ways to be useful.

When he's holding her close and they're swaying, just another pair in the crush, she wonders, "When did you know you loved me? On Dragonstone? King's Landing? Winterfell?" For a moment, feeling thoughtful and romantic, feeling dreamy like the girl she'd begun as.

Jon laughs, surprise in his bronze eyes, and then just a little remorse. He lifts a hand as he contemplates her face, knuckles brushing the upsweep of her silver waves, thumb mapping her cheekbone. "It was raining. We were in Drogon's cave. You said you would bring me somewhere warm. You wanted to give me peace."

Now she's surprised. She remembers the pain in her twisted ankle, the dig of sharp rock in her back, the way he'd hesitated, hovering above her, wanting so badly to kiss her but struggling with himself. "That early?" she murmurs, unconvinced. Daenerys knew she loved him on the Kingsroad. That she'd do anything for him. But she always thought it took him much longer to feel the same. Especially after their disastrous reunion.

"That early," he swears. Something resolute comes over him. His grasp of her firms and his chin lifts and his huskily quiet tone takes a new edge. "And again the day you rescued Greyjoy's prisoners." She's left half her hair loose, just twists of smaller braids keeping it from her face, leaving the lower half to spill freely over her shoulders for the day, so his hand turns and sinks into the thick of it, down her back, pressing her in closer. "Every time I walked among your freedmen. When I watched you dive off a cliff to catch Drogon, terrifying your advisors, frustrating me. When you said you crossed the world for me, because we both know it was more complicated than that, but I believed
you. And again when you risked making an enemy of me to hold me captive on your island so you could protect me. But then you didn't hesitate to take me north to save Arya. When you refused to blame me as you should've for losing your child. And every time you spoke of the world you imagine, despite how cynical I was about it, or how hard I fought getting my hopes up. In the Dragonpit. And again before the Iron Throne.

She tries to tell him, "You don't have to—"

But he's stubborn. "When you rallied the fighters behind you, and you terrified the nobles, and you made the smallfolk believe in you and your kindness. When you took that urchin boy back to the keep with us. When you made me imagine having daughters with you. When you demolished the Traitor's Walk."

This time, she arches up and crushes her lips to his, trying to occupy him. He curves that hand in her hair over the nape of her neck and dips her backward, deepening the kiss. Stealing her breath. In the cold air, his beard scratches painfully at her skin, but the stroke of his warm tongue creates an enticing contrast. It's a kiss that shivers through her, settling in the pit of her stomach like hunger, curling her toes. And when it's done, he catches her hand and twirls her, out and in again, fitting her back into his arms tight against the wind.

His voice is thicker now, rougher, "Every time I see the way you treat Arya. Every time you meet Sansa's suspicion and insolence with patience—"

"She's not so bad," she teases.

"When you keep offering me everything and asking for nothing in return, except loyalty, reminding me how much work it takes to deserve you. Good work, work I value. Your faith in me, despite how mine spent too long wavering—"

"We're both guilty of that. You're always too hard on yourself."

He ignores her, continuing, "When you were unfazed by Bran's revelation. When it didn't occur to you to accuse me of what it looked like with that wildling. How you refuse to be baited by the disrespect of some of my people. And you listened to reason about Viserion, despite every instinct in your body pushing you to be reckless. When you came back from Dragonstone and galvanized us into something none of us would've ever considered, getting the innocents out of the way so drastically, an exodus the likes of which hasn't happened in a thousand years. But you thought of it, and you didn't shy away from it, because the unthinkable to everyone else is commonplace for you, because you've spent your life a nomad across all these distant lands and you've embraced them all and it's expanded the scope of your mind in a way those of us that live so limited in our own kingdoms can't fathom. Even after all this time getting to know you and your world, that still startles me. *Fascinates* is maybe the better word for it."

"Enough," she whispers under the sudden uproar of laughter behind her, burrowing under his cloak, wrapping her arm across the small of his back in a vulnerable hug. She buries her face in the fur on his shoulder for a moment, muffling, "Enough, enough. I don't want praise. Not from you."

"I'm your husband now, means it's my job," Jon declares with a wry huff. "If this shakes out our way, I mean to do a proper amount of praising in our very long marriage."

She turns her head so her face is exposed, temple resting on him instead. "I wish you wouldn't. I'm not always good at praising, and if you do it more, you'll make me feel like a bad wife." She says it playfully, but they both know it's true.
"My point is... My point, Dany, is I've fallen in love with you a thousand times." She pulls back to look at him, intent on every facet of his unguarded expression. Unguarded but complex, gratified but still with the darkness he forever carries. "I don't want you to doubt that. I'm overcoming my instincts, trying to get every thought I've had of you in order, to spill out as many of these damned words as I can, because I don't want you ever doubting this. Everything else, everything that came between us, and the mistakes we made, none of it matters. Even when it was happening, nothing could've truly turned me from you. Because I love you, because you're immensely loveable. Don't ever let anything convince you otherwise."

Jon, she means to breathe out. Something, anything, but instead she swallows, stuck in silence. But the voice in her head is loud. *You break my heart. You make me so crazy happy. You terrify me.*

Is he saying this because he thinks about what she does? Thinks of the very strong possibility that it won't be them both that perishes here if they all don't survive. That it'll be one or the other. That she could be left to keep moving forward without him. She's mostly considered the opposite, but with the way he's looking at her now, with his words like cold echoes in her head, she imagines becoming his widow. Still having to stand tall, be queen, wage war. And in the years following, a loneliness like the one that swallowed her after Drogo's death.

There had been a long time she believed no one could really love her. The mother of monsters, she'd thought. Meant to stand alone.

But that's going backward, not forward. Jon changed all that and she refuses to be regressed to that miserable time again, that miserable version of herself, full of delusions and misconceptions and grief and longing. She simply refuses.

Jon won't die. Her falling would be unfair enough, but she won't live without him. Absolutely not.

And once the fear is pushed aside, there's nothing left but love. *Overpowering* love, leaving no outlet for such brimming intensity but a sudden swell of desperate desperate desire. Urgently, she shakes off his hands out of her hair, grabbing his wrist, tugging him behind her through the crowd. They keep going until they've left the busier end of the street and duck into a narrow alleyway between houses. She spins and walks backward deeper down, slowing to a suggestive sway, grinning up at his incredulous look as she pulls him along.

"What is it you think you're doing, woman?" he jokes, reluctant but indulgent to her whim. "Anybody could walk by and see us."

"Her brow rises. "And? What will they say? We can do as we like."

"You've spent too long with your Dothraki," he chides.

She teases, "You've not spent enough."

When they round the corner, she plants her palms to his torso and shoves him up against the back of a house, his hands falling into her hair again as she kisses him. She works blindly at loosening the laces of his doublet, just wanting to get in past the undertunic and feel his warm skin on her fingers. They leave their cloaks around them, but she opens his trousers and he lifts her skirts, sparked by her excitement, thickened and provoked by her dripping arousal to match that urgency. Amused reluctance turned to fervor.

He dips at the knee a bit to get inside her, taking hold of her hips, marking bruises into the fat flesh there through the bunched gown. She's on her toes, biting his lip, arching into him, strung like a bow. When she pistons her pelvis against his, he groans. He tugs her even firmer flush, drags his stubbled
jaw across her cheek until she shivers at his hot breath on her ear, a growl vibrating down in his throat. "The things I'm gonna do to you back in our proper bed…"

It pulls a very girlish laugh out of her. Another shiver up her spine, a flare of the feverish hunger she's been suffering stronger and stronger more often. Her control snaps. She becomes impatient, needy, artless. She does the trick with her hips again, pulling demandingly at his shoulders, making him hoist her abruptly. She hooks her legs around his back and he turns to press her into the new wood. In the jostle, he's slipped loose and her excessive skirts got pinned in the way. They scrabble together to shove it aside, to thrust in again, to arch and buck tautly, finding an animal rhythm.

"You've offered me plenty," she pants after awhile, thinking back to his devoted words, mouth hanging open against his as they jolt. "I've asked for plenty in return, haven't I?"

Jon falters, blinking, refocusing. Rasps, "I keep thinking to do more for you. To prove…" He shakes his head, hitchs her higher. "But there's never time."

"Nothing to prove," she gasps, voice quaking mid thrust. Her nails dig into his flesh and her head drops hard against the building. Distracted, struggling, "Just be beside me, Jon Snow. Love me, be my husband, that's all. I'll do the same … and … we'll try to live up to each other."

"Are these your wedding vows?" he huffs happily, one hand reaching for her jaw, tipping her face back down so he can kiss her. Messily, hungrily, not gently.

Daenerys replies, "They are," against his tongue. But pulls apart to tell him very seriously, "Let's not keep score, alright? I don't want you keeping score."

"Alright."

After their hurried passion behind the row houses, the celebrators oblige them back to the square, back to the thick of it. The wedding feast, a feast with no food. No food, but too much drink. He sits and finds pleasure in watching the people be happy. Can't quite banish all the worry, but it's buried pretty deep today. Deeper still since Dany pulled him aside and spun his head about.

Even now, he's still thinking of the sight of her, majestic wedding gown thrown up at her waist, skin blushed, hair shamefully mussed by the wind and his possessive hands. He thinks of the medallion resting between her breasts, the way he'd caught on it as he drove into her, hesitating, laying his palm over it, feeling her chest heave.

Jon once sneered at Joffrey's royal arms displaying a bastardized Lannister and Baratheon sigil. Shouldn't the king's arms be enough? he'd thought. Why lift his mother's House equal to the king? he'd wondered. Felt, It wasn't right. And yet… And yet, he'd been a fool in a lot of ways. He'd known nothing, had he?

Seeing her wear that medallion on her throat thrills him. Warms him. The wolf and the dragon, together, joined as one. Instead of an arrogant flaunt, it feels like a proud declaration. Her love, her acceptance, a way to show Dany has embraced him and all he is, all he loves. An intention of the future. He's going to try his best to do justice to that, to do the same for her and hers.

"So what will it be? King Jon Stark or Targaryen?" she asks, tracing a fingertip along the line of his stubbled jaw with a teasing smile, as if she senses his thoughts.

"King Snow," he says, giving her that look.
She's surprised, pulling back, face twisting in confusion, but he just smiles. "I don't understand. You spent your life wanting to get out from under that name."

"Aye, but you want a champion for bastards, don't you? Who better than your bastard king? Besides, I've gotten used to it. Daesay grown fond." His arm around her waist slides her down the bench to him and up onto his lap, ignoring the raucous disorder around them. "I like the way it sounds on your lips."

She sinks her fingers into his curls, gripping the back of his neck. "Well then, King Snow it is." And kisses him.

Which is when the world darkens.

Overtaking the grey daylight is a sudden sweep of roiling clouds, a black writhing snarl that eclipses the sun. They look up, the whole town falling to stillness, watching it move in. For a moment, just a moment, then it propels them to their feet and into motion. Wind is coming in from the east, rattling at the wood of the houses, picking up loose debris to whip. Horses are scattering in alarm and men are struggling to catch them. The calm drift of snowfall turns abruptly into a pelting blizzard.

Dread is a living beast in his chest. The horror in dawning realization.

"Get everyone inside now!" Jon orders, but that changes a second later. War horns resound in the distance, raising the alarm. He'd been walking away, but he snatches her wrist at the sound, a bruising grip in his fear. "Forget that! Everyone left that can't fight goes to the caravan!" He's dragging her along as he finds lieutenants, keeping her closer to his body than she needs to be. "Get your battalions into position! You all know where you need to be!" Then he reaches his siblings, Arya leading Sansa as she pushes Bran's chair through the mad crush, everybody shouting, the storm screaming. Urgent, dreaded, he demands, "Why didn't your ravens see?"

Monotone, his brother says, "He must've deceived my eye."

And Jon turns his attention from him in frustration. He puts a hand to the side of Arya's face, quick and gruff and fervent, "Get them on the caravan. Go south." His eyes dart from her to their siblings. "Take care of each other." The girls give him grave nods, and as they turn away, he jerks his head at his wolf, says, "Ghost, with them."

A hand slips into her free one and Daenerys meets Missandei's scared gaze with a comforting determination. Squeezes her fingers. "Keep with them. Help Arya lead the caravan," she tells her, and a previous conversation echoes back to them. "We'll meet again. Go."

Watching their family shove through the bodies surging in different directions, those that will flee, those that will fight, Jon slides his grip from her wrist to lace their fingers, clasping hard. "Call for Drogon. Get in the sky."

"I have. He's hunting."

His head turns, their eyes locking, not knowing if the dragon will make it back in time, not knowing if he even should. Jon casts a helpless look around the chaos, saying grimly, "I've gotta get you behind Winterfell's walls before I join the defense."

After overseeing the rest off, as people run, he catches a horse by the reins and hoists her up into the saddle before she can mount. She'd probably not be able to anyway, encumbered by the cloak and gown. He swings up behind her and kicks off, following the flow of soldiers and warriors rushing
out of Winter Town to join with the stationed garrisons. Until they reach the split in the road and Jon veers the horse toward Winterfell, breaking off from the majority.

A few Dothraki Queensguard chase them.

She hadn't noticed before, because all she could see was a sea of eclectic soldiers rushing over the snowy hills, but now they dive alone into an unyielding grey. The mists have settled, undeterred by the violent winds, bound so thick, so dense without the sun, obscuring everything around them until the whole world is shadow and fog. She can barely make out the enormous keep ahead. She can barely make out her hand in front of her face.

Halfway across the moors, there's a horrible rumble from beneath. The frozen ground cracks. Everything jolts, like the earth has been jerked from under them. The horse screams, buckles in its gallop, and Jon jumps from the saddle, knocking her to the air before she can go down entangled with the animal. As she crashes into the snow and rolls, another rumble quivers through the hills. The crack widens, crevice crawling jaggedly down the hill toward them. No, toward her. When she gets to her feet, she can't find Jon.

She yells for him, she screams his name, a painful ringing in her ears that drowns everything out but the roar of the storm. She spins, searching the furious swirl of blinding whiteness. She can't see anything but the wind. It pushes at her so she can hardly stand, whipping her hair at her skin in painful lashes, ripping at her cloak. The horse has fallen into the crevice and Jon is gone. Panic has her heart in her throat, but she goes cold when she sees the streak of blue lighting up the grey. Battle focus steadies Daenerys, watching the breath of dragonfire so far away, smashing into the stonework of Winterfell's tallest tower. Dragonfire so hot that it crumbles the ancient stone at its touch.

Not even Drogon's fire could do that.

"Viserion," she says on a great heaving sigh as she goes suddenly calm. Eerily and enraged. It washes over her when her black son drops out of the grey, landing beside her with a wild roar. His blood is pumping, furious, eager for the fight.

Jon will have to find his own way, she realizes, refusing to let her heart sway her, knowing where she needs to be, knowing she can't wait.

Gathering her cumbersome skirts, she climbs his wing and straddles his neck. He's lifting up before she has a strong grip. And they're already too late. The tower comes crashing down to crush the screaming people below and expose Winterfell to the extreme storm. They follow the unnatural blue, fighting against the wind, cornering around the east of the keep to dive at the wight dragon. When hesitation tries to stall the momentum of her cold rage, she lets Drogon's seething fill her limbs with heat and animal bloodlust.

That's not your child, she reminds herself. That's a perversion.

The people on the ground are her children and she must protect them. She must remember them.

As he dives, Drogon swings himself backward, feet forward, talons out, crashing into the wight from above, catching his flank with them. The force chokes off the blue stream and slams their hulking bodies into the side of the keep, cracking it further beneath them. Drogon's teeth pin his brother's neck to the wall, a spiked spine of his wing curving to stab into Viserion's when it flaps over her, piercing the stone to pin it. Snarling and screeching awfully at each other, Viserion's legs scrabble wildly, clawing at Drogon's underbelly.
It's the worst thing she's ever experienced.

If it was just her, she'd be weak enough to pull back, shy away, cringing from the rabid viciousness and hurt between her sons. But it's not her son. It's a corpse, a slave, and they must resort to whatever it takes to put him down. They must fling headlong into the ugly rage. They must. They must.

Before they can push their advantage, Viserion's tail lashes over Drogon's back, almost crushing her. On the second strike, Drogon thrusts backward to protect her, giving up his pin. Wings flapping hard enough to rip roots out, he rises away, barraging bright fire down on the wight before Viserion can recover. But out of that hot explosion, he surges at them, appearing abruptly through the flames to ram his hunched shoulders at Drogon's chest. They go spinning from the blow, wind doing the rest to ruin his balance, keeping him from righting himself until it's nearly too late.

Just as he's veering around to face his brother again, the destructive heave of broken stone pulls her attention. Another chunk of Winterfell wall splinters off and starts to careen over. Right above at least a thousand fighters that've been pushed back from the perimeter battles. Her body tilts where she's mounted, steering her son around. Sacrificing their back to Viserion, she leads Drogon in a desperate dash, dipping under and ramming the edge of giant falling slab to knock it aside, turning its descent enough to spare the bulk of the men below.

By the time he's climbing the wind again, Viserion is nowhere to be found. Lost in the grey. But Drogon's vision must be better than hers, because he sees what she can't and it pushes him to circle the keep. From the lighter guarded west side, a horde has approached unimpeded. Drogon lands heavy on the jagged battlement edge where the tower was broke off and a gaping hole in Winterfell waits for the horde to spill in and slaughter. Talons sinking into the tiered top for purchase, he pitches forward, spiked wings crawling his upper half down the remnants of wall, body blocking the opening. While people flood wildly out of the keep any route they can, the dragon spreads fire across the field, alighting the wights in massive swaths.

When the west is full of fire, he lifts off and circles again, gliding low over the battlefields swarming Winterfell, trying to get a clear sight through the mists and winds. She can't help her men on the ground, not the ones in the thick of it, without setting them ablaze alongside their enemy, so she steers Drogon past them. He loops to come at the hordes from behind, blazing, helping the soldiers create a pincer.

He's hovering above, working to decimate a particularly dense grouping of giants and beasts, when Viserion slams down onto his back from the sky. His talons cut through Drogon's hide, pressing him down out of midair as Drogon fights to push them upward. Daenerys is dislodged by the crash, scrabbling to catch at her son's spikes before she completely falls, but she's thrown about through their wrestling, necks bending to snap at each other, tails lashing. They roll through the air together, struggling, before Drogon finally manages to buck him off.

At the last second, she catches on his leathern wing and the next flap of it sends her spilling back onto his neck. She grabs on and steers him around, trying to get above his brother, dodging his next dive. He's so focused on Viserion, he forgets the dangers surrounding them. An ice spear pivots through the blizzard and Daenerys spots it by luck just short of too late, throwing her mind and body sideways to make Drogon twist, wings tucking. Because of that, it misses his throat, but clips his thigh instead. The hit makes him screech, wrenching violently, and Viserion strikes before he can recover, catching talons in Drogon's chest while he's upside down and she's flying free, held on by nothing but one fiercely gripped hand on a spike, bearing them downward beneath him.

Already too close to the ground, there's no time to fight it. Daenerys has to save herself, deserting her son in his plummet by kicking off, thrown free of them seconds before she would've been crushed.
between two dragons and the earth.

The landing batters through every part of her, even through the cushion of snow. She tries to roll to lessen it, but the flat of a valley snatches her, making the impact into something even and excruciating. The shock of pain threatens to black her out, but she went down in the middle of an undead army and she can't just lie here. They'll tear her apart. So she ignores the disjoint of her shoulder and the buckle of her leg and the stab of her hip and she pushes up.

Getting breath in her lungs makes her cry, her insides not wanting to contract, as if they might fracture apart if they do. She's made it only so far as her knees, hunched, gasping in pain and suffocation, palm to the snow, when she looks up to find Viserion hovering in the sky. Right above her. She looks up and meets the alien eyes of the Night King on his back.

Drogon is struggling off his back some ways away, tail sweeping the ground to batter at the wights that try to swarm him. She can't get to him in time, not in time to protect herself from Viserion's scorching dragonfire. She braces for the burn, expects it to swallow her whole… But it never comes. That awful eerie monster stares into her soul then lifts high into the storm. Leaving her alive. He steers Viserion back towards the thick of the battle, breathing blue flame across her men.

Sick relief drops her forward again, eyes screwing shut for just a second, tears on her face in grief and shame. She's never felt such terror in her life. She's never known so certainly she was about to die. And she'd never been so viscerally resistant to that fate. But she can't let it paralyze her again. She can't allow herself that selfish fear. She cries out in pain, getting her feet under her, staggering towards Drogon.

Daenerys wades blindly through ravaging wights, not letting them slow her, the injured dragon ripping them apart and burning them off before they can hurt her. She falls against his heaving side, tired and shuddering in pain, body wanting to give out on her and collapse. She uses him for support, following down to his leg, reaching for the spear still sticking out of him. But the second she touches it, she rears back with a hiss, looking at her shaking hands. Looking at the mangled burns it imprints on her skin, feeling the unbearable sear of the ice still, as if she never let go.

_Not so unburnt anymore_, a treacherous voice comes from the back of her mind.

Ignoring all that would divert her, she forges stubbornly through. Fills her hands up with her Stark cloak and grabs onto the ice spear. Even through bunched layers of thick fabric, it burns her, but she won't let go. Drogon screeches in distress. Getting grimmer, she wrenches, screams at the pain in her shoulder, wrenches again, and again, and on the fourth try, the spear slides free. She drops it into the snow with a curse.

Hands slapping overhead at her son's wound, his hot blood gushes through her fingers and down her arms. It won't stop. When a pack of wights get under his flame and surge for her, his wing slams down between them, sweeping to catch them up and send them flying. Thinking quick, she twists the cloak up and tosses one end of it around his leg, pulling tight, tying it over.

After that, one of her arms is all but useless, hanging from the damaged shoulder limply when she makes it worse by pushing through the pain to help her son. She tears off a bit of skirts and wraps her black blistered palms to help her grip his horns. She struggles back up onto him one-handed, feet and knees making the difference. She knows she won't be able to hold on like this for very long. She's gotta make it count.

_I don't want to die_, she thinks. _I don't want to die, I don't want to die. I have too much to live for now_. But she must fight.
Behind them, the quaking keep takes another blow. Viserion is working at demolishing the last remaining watchtower as they return to the sky. Right before it topples, the last surviving ballista gets one last shot off. The dragonglass spear cuts through the dragon's wing, sending him spinning. But that's it. He rights his flight and finishes off the tower.

It must not have been a true enough hit, because nothing magical happens. The wight dragon doesn't fall like his strings are cut. The spear leaves a ragged hole in his already half ruined wing, but it doesn't take him out of the sky.

And Daenerys knows what she has to do. All she has left to do, the only way she can think of to help her people survive today…

"We have to go. We have to draw him away." Steeling herself, refueling with the heat of battle focus stoking her blood. Through gritted teeth, she tells Drogon, "Get his attention."

It must've been some kind of volcanic eruption from the hot springs beneath Winterfell. Whatever it was, it's enough to unsettle the foundation. It's enough that it can't stand up under the dragon's assault. Jon finds himself drawn away from the main fray in favor of helping people escape the keep before it collapses, funneling them in a tightly packed parade downhill towards Winter Town to chase the fleeing caravan. At either side of them, the fighting rages on, soldiers struggling to keep the enemy from breaking through to them. But it's impossible.

Even before the keep begins crumbling, they can't utilize the trebuchets along the battlements without risking their own because they can't see.

The perimeter garrisons get obliterated early on and the battalions can't hold a line through the blizzard. They get steadily pushed back, closer and closer to Winterfell, pushed towards the destruction looming above and below as stone falls and ground fractures. Hordes bust past every closed flank before they're able to properly form, until all their strategies are pointless and armies are scattered, soldiers spinning in circles, struggling to fight off ravagers from every direction. It's less a battle, more mad melee. When a unit does manage to pull together and strengthen their position, a piece of Winterfell will fall and crush them, or the Night King's dragon will spill fire across a hill, breaking them apart again.

The only bit of reassurance he can hold to is the flash of orange fire he keeps seeing through the storm.

But it's not enough. They can't stand straight through the wind or the still slightly shifting earth under their feet. They can't see clearly in the grey and frenzy of white whipped about. They're getting trounced. They're losing too many. This can't be their last stand. They're only helping the dead.

With the storm, with the quake, without Winterfell to defend a siege from behind, all is lost here. He can't let that happen.

Catching the reins of a horse that goes by, he tells the rider, "I need your mount. Go with them." Pulling him down, pushing him towards the exodus.

"Your Grace," he pants, stumbling off, shocky and disoriented like all the rest.

Jon rides into the thickest. He fetches runners to find the battle commanders at every corner, ordering them to fall back. "Get as many as you can beyond the ridge and we'll trigger the cache." Then he does what he can in the fight.
Dothraki screamers are faring best of all, their looser style more adaptable to the wild mindless swarming and diving of the undead. They ride through the chaos, horses never slowing enough to be topped, swinging their curved blades and rapid slinging bows from their saddles. The southern soldiers have it worst, their heavy armor restrictive and slowing them, keeping them from twisting and angling the way they need to in reaction. It protects their bodies, but once they get trampled, they don't get back up from under the crush.

He's spurring his horse into a wight swarm that's boxed in a contingent of Reachers, trying to smash open their closed flank and give the men a chance, when something cuts his horse from under him at the ankles. He kicks out of the saddle mid crash, just barely avoiding being pinned, rolling through the snow with his sword drawn. Without stopping, he rolls up onto one knee, blade arcing at whatever it is that lunges through the grey at him. Even as Longclaw catches on meat and a gush of black blood, the impact knocks him onto his back, and he finds himself beneath a snarling blue-eyed direwolf. A wight pack coming together around him, fangs bared.

Throwing the dead thing to the side, he spins up again from his back to his hip to his knees to his feet, wrists twisting, blade swinging, slashing through the monstrous animals as they come at him. He shoves the sword up into a chest when it jumps, leaving off his other hand to loose the dragonglass dagger at his belt and drive it from the elbow, past his shoulder into the snapping jowl of the next, sword wrenching free to swing overhead, hacking into a rotted wolf skull.

When the dagger shatters against bone, he shifts both hands back to the sword and spins from another lunge. But he's caught in a pincer, pushed from one to the next, nearly tackled and torn apart. He's saved by the downswing of a battleaxe that cuts off the wolf's head, another axe dismembering its brethren, wildlings surrounding him now. Fighting beside him.

At the peak of the nearest hill, a trio of screamers work at felling a wight giant that barrels through the men at its feet by the dozen with easy swipes. Riverlanders are cutting at its legs as a Dothraki perches in his saddle, leaping onto its back and driving his arakh across the giant's neck. The men on the ground scatter to avoid being crushed as it drops to its knees and topples like a tree, further cracking the weakened earth all around.

Standing on the edge of a long fissure, Jon comes upon little Lady Mormont, bow drawn, using up her quiver to lure wights from the other side, leading them running, scrabbling, falling into the breach. Clever girl. But he's not happy to see her. Over the wind and the roar of battle, he shouts, "What the hell are you doing here?! You should be on the caravan!"

Her bow doesn't pause, her scowl unfaltering. "I'm not leaving my men!"

"Don't be stupid! Your men are dead!"

"I doubt that! Bear Islanders are survivors!"

Which is when the unholy screech of a dragon has them both spinning to see the last standing tower of Winterfell crack at the base under blue flame and fall, breaking the earth under it ever worse. Reverbervations run all the way across the moors to them, and the fissure beside them widens, making Jon jerk the girl with him to steadier ground. When the jostling fades and they can stand surer, he feels the beat of wind harshen from above and looks up to find Viserion flying over. Streaming fire as he goes. Streaming fire right across their path.

Grabbing the kid around the waist, Jon spins with her, dropping to one knee, hunched over her, pressing her into the snow, trying to shield her from the heat as it comes. But it never touches them. Another screech rings through the air, mixing into a deeper roar, and his eyes go up just as Drogon swirls through the sky over him. The bigger beast clipped his brother, thrust him off, and now he
flees, luring the Night King away, leaving them all behind.

Our chance, Jon thinks. Now's our chance. If they can get everybody past the ridge and set the waiting cache off, they can burn through so much of this horde. They can burn the bodies of their fallen men before the Night King can raise them.

Gods, Dany, don't let that fucker catch you.

He turns in a slow circle, scanning the ruined vastness, trying to make out what's happening all around them through the grey. What he sticks on is the battered muster of Westerlanders left standing on the other side of the breach, struggling their way out of a swarm, trying to make it down the hill to join their fleeing division.

"You've done enough," he tells Lyanna, a steadying hand on her shoulder before he pushes her towards the nearest soldier. Orders, "Take her past the ridge!" Then he puts two fingers in his mouth and whistles for the embattled wildlings nearby, yelling, "Free Folk, with me!"

And he takes a running jump, crossing the jagged fissure, landing roughly, rolling. He comes up quick, ignoring his body's protests, swiveling his sword for momentum as he joins the fray. Behind him, wildlings follow, falling upon the wights that are tearing at the southerners. Sinking swords and axes and daggers and their bludgeoning weapons. Not everybody has dragonglass or Valyrian steel. Some can only smash the dead to ineffectual pieces, leaving the rotted fragments writhing.

Jon cuts through one's torso and whirls to the next, kicking it over, driving Longclaw down through the snow to pierce its chest, ducking under the lunge of another at the same time, spinning and flipping the blade over his shoulder to catch it before it can spin and come back.

He's faced with a tight pack of five approaching and he backpedals to brace himself, bumping into something, checking over his shoulder to make sure it's not something that'll kill him. Back to back with a Lannister soldier, a young man with a slack expression of shaking terror. A boy really. He's lost his helmet and his face is soaked in reeking black blood and he's down to just a dagger. His ginger hair is slicked to his brow with the putrid muck. Jon has to cut through the five when they dive for him, but he keeps the Lannister in his periphery. He doesn't know if it's because he's watching out for him or if he still expects a knife in the back. Instead, the boy helps him dispatch the pack.

He lets him help him up from where he'd been tackled, then shoves his shoulder in the direction of the retreat. Barks, "Go."

But Jon doesn't follow. He keeps fighting. Wading through the thick of unending death that never stops coming. He shouts for the wildlings to go, but they don't abandon him. They help him make progress through the battlefield, reaching as many fighters as they can, too beset to escape, and clear their way.

In a particularly grisly valley, the king decapitates a leaping wight with a hard arc and finds himself faced down by a towering White Walker. He steps back, half turns, only to jerk short, a second Walker at his back. He can't get his sword up in time as it's barely finished its downswing, and the ice spear drives into his shoulder, sending Jon to the ground with a pained yell. His tingling fingers scrounge blindly in the snow, straining for Longclaw's lost hilt, but the Walkers close in.

Desperation has him gripping the spear with one hand, his ungloved hand, where he'd lost the damn thing somewhere along the way. He yanks it out of him to unpin himself, flipping it as he flings upright, getting two hands on it as he gets a knee under him, using it to knock the reaching skeletal hand aside and thrust the spear through the first Walker's desiccated gut.
He's as surprised as the second Walker when it explodes in a burst of broken ice chunks and corpse dust. They stare at the aftermath for just a heartbeat, both in shock, then they glance at each other and Jon does an ugly dive for his sword. The Walker hefts his spear overhead, bringing it down to impale him, just as Jon grabs the hilt and flips to his back, blade clanking against the ice just shy of his nose. He takes a breath, gets vicious, rams his boot heel into the Walker's kneecap, buckling him, giving the king a split second to cast the spear aside and swing his sword through the Walker's neck. From his backside, there's not enough force to cut through a spine, but the blow does enough, Valyrian steel sinking into the Walker's skin, destroying the magic.

All across the valley, wights collapse to the snow like corpses should.

Jon clambers stiffly back to his feet in the howling wind. He grabs at his wounded shoulder to make sure it'll wait, then looks down at his hands, fingers flexing, wondering for just a moment at the weird nerveless sensation. It's a numb iciness branded across his bare palm where he'd gripped the Walker's unnatural spear. Right over the scar tissue from his old burn.

So their own magic can hurt them. Good to know.

"King Crow!" a wildling calls, snapping him out of it.

When they've gone as far as they really can, as deep into the horde as they can possibly survive, they turn back together. What's left of them try to make it to the ridge for themselves. Too many fall. And there are still too many left behind where they couldn't get to, cornered, stranded, abandoned.

He reaches the final ridge outside Winter Town, joining the blockade that's taken up there, retreated from the moors. The few that aren't yet already on the Kingsroad southward. He climbs the rickety ladder to the top of the lookout, where Grey Worm and the last commanders await the irrevocable command, five archers poised to loose their alt arrows towards the marked spots in the distance. Warning flags as markers whipping in the wind, helping to find them in the grey. He casts his gaze across the weather and war torn landscape, his ruined homeland, and he casts it down over the men still raging in battle, working to keep the horde from advancing too far.

Commander Vance is gruff, but his panic rings clear, shouting, "We can't wait any longer! They'll overtake the boundary soon!"

*Give them a little more time*, Jon wants to demand. *Give our men more time to get to safety. Let us sacrifice less of them than need be.*

But he can't afford to say that. They can't afford to wait. He goes to give the order and hesitates again, his father's creed echoing in his head. *The man that passes the sentence should swing the sword.* And he shall. He's killing these men. Let him do it with his own hands.

Jon takes a recurve bow out of Qhono's grasp, nocks an arrow, and takes aim with the rest of the readied archers. *"Fire!"* he commands. And the bowstrings sing. Because the wind pushes them off course, it takes quite some tries for every trigger to set off. But when it does, the chain reaction of the stockpile going up is like nothing he's seen before. Nothing he ever wants to see again.

Green sparks, exploding into the sky, burning his vision so he has to turn away. The northside cache went off at the first quake, part of what broke their perimeter so swiftly at the start, but what remains is plenty enough. Wildfire rocks across the white hills and swallows up everything he came from. If Winterfell wasn't destroyed before, it's surely gone now. The perverted fire eats away everything in its reach. Men die instantly. Half the horde burns down, and the other half doesn't have much room to escape, a ring of wildfire in the south and the north and the east. Winter Town incinerates all the way to the edges just beneath them.
It's such a slurry, he can't tell whether the screaming is men or beasts or the wind or maybe the fire.

The queen is fading.

Drogon's strength is waning every league they fly. There's only so much further he can endure for, this wounded, and he knows she can't hold on much longer. So he lets his exhaustion lag his flight. He lets his brother catch up. He wouldn't otherwise. Viserion was always slower, so much smaller, weaker, and now he might be stronger, but he's even slower through the air with his wings decaying and torn open. But they kept chasing, giving her what she wanted, getting farther and farther from Winterfell.

Why? she wonders. This monster is no fool. He must know what she's doing. And he had a chance to kill her, but he chose to spare her. So it's not because he's just that desperate to hunt her down and dispose of her. To extend her suffering? Or is it worse than that? Was she right, how she felt in that fever dream? Perhaps he didn't burn her because he intends a worse fate for her. Perhaps he chases because this is what he wants. To drive her off, to get her alone, cornered, defenseless.

If he divides her from her son, he can do anything to her out here.

But Drogon is not an easy conquest. If he wants to wield him as his weapon one day, he won't truly burn him, not enough to destroy him. Enough to hurt is a different story. The singe of excruciating blue flame still seethes at his underbelly, aching through her down their bond, even more painful than her ravaged hands where they white knuckle his horns. But if he wants to separate them, that's what he'll have to do. He'll have to reduce Drogon to ash. And that's not happening.

Viserion closes in and her black son fills her with one last surge of fighting rage and viciousness. She knows what he wants. She knows what he's mustering up for. Grim, pained, determined, Daenerys hugs to him with every bit of strength she has left in her body. Her thighs, her knees, her ankles, her one good arm, squeezing at him, viced to him through sheer stubbornness. She grits, "Do it."

The behemoth dragon tips down into a nosedive, wings tucked, his dead brother right on his tail. Halfway to the ground, he flips himself, wings splaying suddenly to catch at the air and help him reverse. His talons latch to Viserion's wing joints before he can spread them, his fangs sink past scales into flesh and meat, and his tail curves to slam across his shoulders, sweeping the Night King from his back. With a brutal wrench, he rips his brother's throat out. Kicks off, righting himself, even as he sends his brother into freefall after his master.

Right side up again, she collapses against his neck, her entire body going slack, spilling over him, nothing left in her to summon.

She's not foolish enough to think either of them have been defeated for good, but they got them out of the sky at least. For now, that'll have to be victory enough. She got them out of the battle. Her king will have to do the rest.

Drogon doesn't turn back. He keeps pushing ahead into the horizon. They passed the storm awhile ago, but the wind still hurts like ice shards. And she recognizes the smell, the feel, of nearing the sea. She tries to tell him to go back, that they have to go home, and even she's not convinced she's right. What good are either of them now, like this, back at Winterfell? They'd only be a liability, a target for a White Walker.

Not that they could even make it back.
Turns out, they can't even make it forward.

The dragon's singed wings give out against the ferocious wind soon and he begins to falter, flight growing jagged, descending instead of rising. He doesn't land, he crashes. And Daenerys doesn't have the energy to brace herself. He tries to get his legs under him when he hits, but the wounded thigh buckles, toppling him sideways, his wing bending with a snap instead of stabbing in for balance.

When he rolls, she's thrown free and everything goes black with a sharp blow of unimaginable pain. Just pain, lots of pain, pain everywhere, in every part.

But pain is welcome.

She's not dead. And she's definitely not done.
Chapter 20

+ I'm Not The Only Traveler

"Dany," he calls. "Dany, you have to get up."

"Jon?" she murmurs, struggling out of the dark.

He's leaning over her, grey all around him, the sky. He brushes hair out of her face with a cold calloused hand, stroking her temple, trying to get her to look at him. "Aye, love. Open your eyes." She has, she tries, but it's hard. Her vision is blurred. She barely makes out his encouraging smile, the troubled darkening at his brow. Under his breath, he says, "I wish you weren't the Dragon Queen, y'know. Wish you were just Dany."

"Sorry," she says, sounding slurred, face turning into his palm. There's a ringing in her ears and a fog in her head and pressure pushing down at her. A thousand questions wait in the distance, just out of reach. What she asks instead is, "Do you miss your wildling bride?"

Jon's laugh is humorless, a sad rough sound, a wryness in his sigh. His rasp fills with quiet intensity, swearing, "You're the only bride that'll ever be mine."

"Some wedding night we had," she jokes, but her eyes fall shut again. Darkness begins to thicken. She starts drifting.

"No. Hey, hey, Dany, wake up. You can't rest yet. You gotta get up."

"It hurts," she whispers, face twisting with it. She's so tired. She doesn't have the fire left in her to push through and keep going. She's given that all she can. She just wants to lay down and sleep for awhile. Wait out the pain.

But he's pulling at her. He won't stop. He won't leave her alone. "That's good. That's good it hurts. Hurting means you're still alive, doesn't it? So you gotta move. You're still alive, but you're not safe yet. Work's not done."

"You do it. You finish. Help me."

"There's nobody out here but you, woman."

And then he's gone and she's all alone. At first, she thinks she's dead. Then she thinks she's probably in too much pain for that really. Pain and cold. Then she thinks she's pinned by something horribly heavy, crushed under it, ribcage broken, impossible to get a breath. Then she opens her eyes and she realizes... No. No, she's just got a dragon's head burying her into the snow. Shielding her, warming her.

"Drogon," she groans. She goes to push at him, but one arm won't move at all and the other ends in a hand that's a frostbitten blistered mess. But he feels her need and raises his head anyway, letting her dig her elbow into the snow and drag herself gracelessly out from under him to get a look at where they are now.

She's got the vague sense he was meaning to take her to Dragonstone, but with being too wounded to continue, she has no idea how far they made it.
All she sees is snow. Their landing is on a sloping peninsula, narrow enough that she can make out the jagged drops at either end. So she’s on a cliff somewhere, a coastland that could almost be Dragonstone. But it’s not Dragonstone, and she’s not home, she’s not safe. Looking over Drogon, she’s not going to be flying back to her baby anytime soon. His thigh impaled, his belly burned, his wing snapped at an unnatural angle, the outer spine of it broken, shards of bone protruding.

“Oh, my love,” she cries softly, running her usable hand over his rough skin, trying to soothe him. Her own body hurts so much, she can hardly feel his. It’s there, beyond her own, his hurt and despair. And dark hot ugly aggression twisting inside of her through their bond like a snarl of thorned snakes. But she can’t lie here and cry. “Drogon…”

He growls before she can begin, sensing what she wants.

"I know you’re tired. I know it hurts. I know you can't fly, but you'll have to walk. We can't stay here, out in the open like this. We must find shelter. We must hide."

His tail flicks irritably across the ground, throwing up a cloud of snow. A little of it rains down on her, making Daenerys shudder. And scowl. He’s not in a cooperative mood. She’ll have to push him, and the only way to do that without riling him worse and turning him even more obstinate is to leave it up to him. If she starts walking, eventually he'll give in and follow. Begrudgingly, moodily, making sure she knows he’s not happy, but he won’t get left behind.

The problem is she’s not convinced she can even stand right now, let alone hike through the snow. But she’s never let that stop her before, so she clenches her teeth and crooks her knee and grabs onto Drogon's neck to hoist up to her feet. A cry wrenches out of her, face scrunching, but she stands. All along her spine aches, her hands feel raw and boiled, and her face is swollen. Every bit of her body is bruised, numbed by the freeze. Her shoulder is excruciating, spikes of pain lance her ankle, and her hip feels … wrong. When she takes a fearful step, her muscles rip and her joints pop and her bones creak. She wants to cry. She wants to scream. Darkness pushes at her edges, threatening to sweep her under and spare her the trauma. She takes another step, hunched, limping, buckling. Another step.

Everything burns. She's so tired. The cold leaves her shivering, but sweat drips down her skin.

Behind her, Drogon rumbles again.

Daenerys keeps going. Eyes heavy, muttering deliriously, "We must go forward. We're not safe. They could … find us. We have to … get help. We have to … go home. Drogon, please. We can't stay … here."

Her body gives up on her. The world tips and blunt pain throbs through her again. Dropping to her knees, then her face buried in powder, trying to hold onto her resolve, trying to keep her thoughts from slipping away with everything else.

The Ruin of Winterfell left the frontline beaten down to a ragged parade of soldiers and survivors limping down the Kingsroad. Jon is at the far end of their exodus, scrambling to reorganize his forces, to collect reports from runners riding further ahead and back, getting an idea of the state of things. Scattered, battered, a lot of confusion. There's not much concrete information brought back to him. Just enough to know the tide has once more turned for the worse on them.

Ones that were inside the keep when the mists rose tell him part of why Winterfell ruined so fast was hundreds of wights crawling out of the crypts below the keep when the ground cracked and wrecked
havoc. All the old Kings of Winter…

He can't imagine.

Retreat is slow going by the hundred thousand plus people struggling ahead of him, progress made even slower by having to stop and tend the wounded and the dying. To burn the dead when they succumb. With his family leading the caravan, they're too far ahead to hear word from Bran. To ask questions and get answers. To beg his brother to find Dany with his strange raven eyes.

But what he does know is they must go forward.

First stop along the Kingsroad is House Cerwyn, the ride usually just half a day from Winterfell. Today, they don't get anywhere close, not him and his men. His back half of the battle worn make camp once they gain enough ground, taking the time to try to save as many ravaged as they can. Letting the procession carry on without them, all those who didn't fight, with those who aren't injured.

He gets his shoulder tended when Qhono physically sits him down, glowering and barking in Dothraki. The fetched healer takes a look and says, "Cauterized going in and out, did my work for me. Looks frostbit though. Nothing I can do for that now."

"Told you I'm fine," Jon chides irritably, brushing aside them both. When the Dothraki general follows, guttural and hostile in his native tongue, he snaps, "You know I don't understand you."

"Wolf King is Khaleesi's khal," he responds in Common. He grabs Jon by the elbow as he's striding and turns him around. The king's brow goes up, jerking loose, but he stays facing him, looking up at him, waiting. "To not fail Khaleesi, we keep you alive. It's not how we do. Khals keep self alive."

"I never asked any of you to guard me—"

"Khaleesi asked."

"I can protect myself. And when I need help..." He huffs out an impatient breath, glancing around the hobbled together camp. The screams of the bloodied echo over the wind. "We all protect each other, alright? That's how it works here."

But the Dothraki is frustrated. Resentful too clearly. "Khas should be riding out for Khaleesi. Qhono would go, but White Wolf could die."

Jon stops himself. Breathes in, tempers the turmoil. Steadier, he says, "I wanna go look for her too. But how? Where? And while we do, what will happen to the people here? This fight's not finished. We can't let it fall apart now."

"Khaleesi would use those words," Qhono grudgingly concedes.

"She has Drogon. She'll find her way back to us."

And then he thinks, _She'd better. She'd fucking better._ Because fear threatens to paralyze him. To dump him on his knees. He can't get to Dany, he can't get to Jaeh. For the moment, there's no power that he has to protect his family. For the moment, it's out of his hands. And that's the worst fucking fact ever.

As night falls, he can still see green burning in the distance.
There's ice in her veins. Real, true, it burns through her, courses through, marking her black and unnatural. Ice and agony. She feels lost, confused, like she's forgot the rules of the world, like she's forgot who she is. What she is. Is she human? Is she alive? Is she a god? Is she a monster? This is wrong, somehow very wrong, but she can't explain. She can't answer her own questions. There's ice and there's agony. There's darkness. Ice and a sickness. What is wrong with her?

*What has that thing done to me? I'm not a woman anymore.*

"Your Grace," somebody calls, beckoning her awake, shouting through the wind. "Your Grace, you need help. Let me help."

*What's stopping you?* she thinks. Then realizes Drogon is towering above her, rumbling in hostility. She cranes her head up, wincing at the crack of her neck, and squints through the grey daylight and bleary crusted eyes. A man, small and young, bundled under too few furs. A bow on his shoulder. Sandpaper in her throat when she rasps, "Who are you?"

"Name's Cayn. Came from Widow's Watch, back that way." He throws a thumb behind him, shuffles awkwardly, nervous or afraid. "I serve the Flints, Your Grace."

Widow's Watch of House Flint in the North, the jagged peninsula between the Bite and the Shivering Sea. She almost made it back to Jaehaerys. She got close, but not close enough. On a ship from here, she could reach Dragonstone in a week, if the currents were kind. A month if they weren't. She could…

It doesn't matter.

Jaeh is home to her, wherever he may be, but so is Jon, and they're pulling her in opposite directions. And Jaeh, she knows, is safe. Whereas she left Jon in the middle of madness. It's not time to go back to Dragonstone. All that matters is finding Jon.

"How do you know who I am?" she asks, suspicion, distrust, worry eating at her. She can't defend herself. She can't run. Then she looks at Drogon and remembers he can protect her, even without two functioning wings. Then she looks at Drogon and realizes that was a stupid question. Who else would she be but Daenerys Targaryen, lying here with a dragon? "Never mind. You said you could help me?"

"You can't stay out here. Let me take you back to Widow's Watch."

"I can't walk."

"I've got a … uh." She follows his focus when his head turns. He'd been gesturing towards the shoddy sled contraption behind him when he froze, Drogon's snout lifting from the snow, his neck extending, reaching past the stranger to snatch the carcass off the sled and toss it. They watch him breathe fire over the dead elk then catch it in his teeth again, chomping charred skin and meat and bone. Shakily, the man complains, "That was for the castle."

"I apologize," Daenerys replies, dropping back down, limp and exhausted just from trying to speak, trying to think.

He clears his throat, wrenches his gaze off the dragon. "Can I come closer?"

"Drogon, be still," she commands in Valyrian. Tells him, "Carefully."

He brings his sled with him, positions it beside her, keeping a wary eye on her son. "In this cold, best bet to surviving is conserving energy. I use this thing to drag my kills back after hunts. Eats up less
effort than lugging them on my shoulder." He's talking just to talk as he checks her over, cringing at her cry when he slides her onto the sled and ties a strap around her torso to keep her on.

His words blend like white noise in her ears, darkness encroaching from the edges to swallow her again, pain, sickness. She feels like it's something more than the injuries. She feels like there's something inside of her, something slithering, something poisoning her. But that doesn't make sense. She's being hysterical. The pain and the exhaustion is messing with her head and her senses. She tries to focus, to forget that feeling, but it's growing, there in the back of her consciousness, strengthening, spreading. She's acutely aware of it, even while she's ignoring it. Even while she's telling herself over and over, murmuring deliriously through the incoherent pain as time jumbles up together, passing in jumps and glitches and blurs, telling herself it doesn't exist.

What did he do to me? something hurt and scared whispers inside.

And then she thinks, Wait, who?

Along with the outriders south, Jon sends scouts north off the Kingsroad, through rough terrain, to get as close as safely can to the edge of the wildfire, to note where it's spread and where it's waned, if or how much of the undead have gotten past it so far, how much of a head start they've got, if they're advancing at all.

From the coincidence of the sweeping mist at Hardhome, he'd suspected, feared, and between the scattered battle reports and Bran's talk of winter as if it were a live thing, he'd been fairly certain, but Winterfell changes everything. The way the weather turned against them so sharply, so suddenly, the way the very earth beneath them betrayed the living in the hour of need, it's undeniable. The Night King commands the sky with Viserion, with the wind and the mist and the snow and the ice, enough to crack the ground. He controls death itself and the world's essence.

He's no king… He's a god.

They're waging war against a god. They're losing.

After shelters are fashioned and the wounded are moved in from the elements, after the dying become dead and a grisly pile of bodies is set alight, Jon spends hours with the nearest commanders gathered round, getting tasks in order and arguing over next moves. When he's settled things, caretakers try to send him off to rest, but he finds himself prowling the healer's tents, looking tiredly over the faces of the survivors as they suffer. His mind goes through the day again and again, making poor sense out of the blurred frenzy, obsessively questioning what went wrong, what could've been prevented if they'd only made a better choice. If he had chosen better.

His home is gone. His family is broken again. His people are…

Much as he tries, much as he tells himself he knows how to go forward, is sure of it at every step of the way, even as each step leads to more unforeseen consequences that leave them worse off, he's always at the edge of darkness. Standing at a precipice of black made of failure, death, surrender, he turns his head and ignores it, clings to the impetus required to take action. To keep acting when giving up feels inevitable. They all tell themselves lies to get up each morning, to give another order, to charge into war. Either the lie proves truth, out of blind luck, out of nowhere, feeling like a miracle, or it buries under another lie, and either way they keep going.

Among the wounded, not nearly enough of which have been tended yet, Jon finds the Unsullied commander on a pallet, melted frost and fresh sweat slicking the crusted mud and blood down his
brown skin. He's been stripped of his armor and leather, but nothing's being done about the axe slash across his chest or the broken tip of spear still jammed into his forearm. Not aware, he doesn't think, eyes shut, brow drawn in pain, murmuring in delirious fever.

Grabbing a passing healer at the shoulder, he jerks the man around him towards the pallet and says, "This man commands the entire Unsullied legion. Why is he not being cared after?"

He's rougher in his question than he would be, because the answer occurs to him as he asks it, noting that most the healers here are Westerosi, and most of the already tended are lighter of coloring. It's an insidious observation he would've been blind to a year ago, would've not ever noticed, not ever wondered, and probably found excuses for. Now it leaves a twisting knot of sickness and anger in his gut.

"W-we're working on the worse off as we go," the healer stammers, but as Jon looks around, that's just not true. Seeing the expression on his king's face, he decides, "But I'll take care of him."

Jon oversees the treatment, pacing restlessly but keeping near, his troubled eyes raking the tent, glazing over as the rows and rows of men eat away at him, battered and maimed, unconscious or writhing or moaning or outright screaming. Grey Worm never makes a sound, not when the spear is yanked free, not as ragged skin and muscle is pulled and sewn, but the pain is there in his face, in the brow, in the locked jaw, in the furl of his knuckles, and the way his breath shudders in his chest to puff from his nose. There are hundreds of other men he should be worried about, standing guard over, praying for their recovery. But something keeps him brooding at Grey Worm's side.

Besides, whatever the instinct is, it's a sound one since he suspects Dany's right hand would poison his cider if he let her lover die.

When the healer leaves his patient alone to recuperate, done all he can for him tonight, Jon sits down beside his pallet and hesitates only briefly before reaching out. He holds his hand and listens to the Unsullied murmur under his breath. Two names. Missandei. Mhysa.

"Dislocation. Seen a lot of this in the war," the old man says, and hands her a wood peg. "Bite this, Your Grace." Then he shoves at her shoulder joint and a horrible crack and pop rings in her ears with her choked scream. He probably could've done that better. Tears stream down her face and the hunched old man pats at the dampness with a dirty rag. "It's over now. It'll ache for awhile, and mobility will suffer, but you'll heal."

His inept kindness makes her cry harder, but she smoothes her features into something resembling composure. It's not the sharp flare and grating wrench of her arm forcing back into its shoulder socket that buckles her. It's the shrieking agony of her hip, like bone grinding against bone, taken from the dull throbbing it'd faded to back up to excruciating when Cayn had lifted her to the broken dining table and bent her upright for the old man to inspect.

Yandel, he'd said his name was.

When he nudges at her chest, she eases down flat with a gasp of relief, screwing her eyes shut and gripping the table edge as his hands prod across her. In the doorway, Cayn wrings the cap in his hands, waiting to be of use. Until Yandel says, "Get over here, boy. She's gonna need you holding her down."

"Why?" Daenerys demands, without opening her eyes, head tipped back, digging into the wood.
"Your thigh, my queen." Pity hangs heavy in his voice. "Bone's broke. I can feel it pushing out. Lucky it didn't break skin. Not too sharp, just a little protrusion, but you want it back where it belongs before bone starts mending and it needs breaking again. It's a tricky spot, but it'll have to be set."

"Alright. Do your best."

Yandel cracks a smile. She can't see it, because she can't bear to open her eyes, but she hears it when he says, "Surely. For my queen, surely. I wish we had anything left in the maester's chambers to ease your pain. Nothing much left of anything anymore. Not medicine, not food. I'm so sorry, Your Grace. This is gonna be the worst thing you ever felt for more than a minute or so. It won't get better a long while."

Daenerys laughs, a dry shuddering of breath with pain and weary despair but some humor too. She tells them, "Talk to me when you've survived childbirth."

And then she screams, straining against Cayn's hands pushing down on her while the old man aligns cracked bone back into place, fighting the extreme resistance of contracting muscles, pulling at her swollen ankle and shoving at her bruised knee for traction. Still not half as bad as labor, but she loses time again. Shadows in her vision, in her thoughts, confusion when she resurfaces, still pinned to the table by a regretful man. What is happening to me? she thinks, murmurs it into her shoulder. She's soaked in fresh sweat and old blood, her son's and her own, and her striking silver wedding gown is beyond repair. It's a stupid thing to care about, but the thought brings more tears to her eyes nevertheless.

Wood splint fastened horribly tight to her leg, a hot wet brush slathering wax over her until it hardens, keeping her hip from rotating, making it impossible for her to sit up or bend or arch or do anything really. Emphasizing her already suffocating helplessness. And then he pulls the tattered skirts back down, as if she's any dignity left.

She wonders if she'll ever walk again. If this pain will ever go away.

In the wake of the worst of it, Yandel hunches near her face, gnarled hand patting gently at her wild hair. "There, there. You did good. My queen, may I remove the dress? I wanna get a look at you. Anything else you can tell me, any other wounds but for these scratches you got everywhere? Gonna need to wash off all this grime before I can make heads or tails."

"Can't feel," she slurs. Blinks. Struggles to compose herself, to focus her mind, pushing aside the delirium. "You can cut it away. Try not to leave it in shreds."

"Yes, Your Grace."

"You're not the maester here, are you?" she guesses.

"No, Your Grace. He left with the rest. But I'm the best healer you got."

"Thank you," she sighs, letting her head fall to the side, letting her body go limp. While he works, she looks for distraction. "Cayn, tell me… Tell me what's happened here. I heard nothing of Widow's Watch being attacked."

"It wasn't," the hunter answers. He's not touching her now, but he's hovering still, unsure what to do with himself. When the gown falls apart in the front bodice, exposing her, his eyes rake across the mottled flesh, the heavy breasts, the curving stomach, before he jumps, turning his back. "Cold snap got us good. Made the stone brittle like I'd never seen. When the storm hit, wind or wave or
something, I don't know, must've swept half the cliff into the sea, taking our eastern side down with it. Good thing everybody had already gone by then."

"With the exodus?"

"That's right. The three ships you sent got almost all of House Flint's people and the surrounding area. Rest emptied out the stables and made for White Harbor. That was before we heard about the city being washed out, so we're not sure what happened to them, whether they were hit with it or passed for farther south, maybe caught some of your ships in Saltpans. Don't know. Haven't been getting many ravens lately."

"Nobody has," she murmurs.

"End of times," the old man says to himself, cleaning at her minor wounds with a water basin and a bloody rag. Bandaging her up. "You young folks will think the world's ending, no doubt. But if you know your history, you know it's all a cycle. These things come and go like the tide."

"Yeah, except one's a day and one's once every thousand years," Cayn retorts wryly, like they've had this conversation before.

As she was first carried through the keep, she'd seen all of five faces here, all looking like frightened ghosts when the hunter came in with her, Drogon crawling through the gaping hole in the outer wall of crumbled stone after her. They'd looked ragged and starved and hopeless. And the castle looked decimated, abandoned, haunted by a few lingering souls with no purpose.

"And in every story, we survive," she reminds them both, bolstering herself to instill faith in the men. Through the crying agonized despair, she feels a familiar stubbornness spark back to life, well remembered. "Cyclical means winter passes, night passes, and we roll into a better era until the next go around. I intend to make our thousand years golden and glorious and peaceful. And warm."

The two laugh, sharing a look above her, across her battered body, sharing a smile, young and old. "Y'know," Cayn says, suddenly thoughtful, "I heard what people were grumbling about. That some folks think you're stealing their land and lying. Some think you're shipping them off as war chattel, just like you did your conquered easterners. But most of us know the truth."

"And what's that?" she asks, pretending the pain no longer exists.

He meets her eyes with a new expression of earnestness. "You'll get us through. You'll keep your promises. You'll find a way."

Dreaming of Dany. Remembering. Imagining.

The warm press of her skin, the weight of her curves settling on top of him when she straddles his thighs, strong feminine fingers pushing his shirt up, massaging deep and hard into the aching muscles of his back, his shoulders, her hands so hot in the numbing air. The heat of it stimulates him through the numbness, stirring his blood, waking his body. In his tent, facedown on his pallet, arm tucked under his head, he groans at the pressure, the painful pleasure. Knots begin untying.

But then it bleeds to reality, his mind waking to feel real weight on him. For just a split second, his entire terrified being relaxes in relief, soaring with it, and he can finally breathe again at the thought of her return. An image hits him, Drogon landing in camp, Dany striding through the soldiers to find his tent, waking him this way. Except…
It's not quite right.

Less weight than Dany's has been lately. Her hands are cold, not hot, and not as calloused. She smells wrong, feels wrong, he realizes, and that second of soul deep relief turns bitter. He bucks without warning, dislodging the woman so he can twist to his feet off the pallet. Sees the wildling again, the one that's caused him so much trouble. He doesn't even know her name, but he'll never forget that face.

"What the hell are you doing?"

"What we do when we escape certain death," she answers calmly, shrugging. She climbs off the pallet to come smoothly towards him as he backpedals. "Remind ourselves we're still alive."

When she leans alluringly into him, hand going downward, Jon snatches her wrist and holds it out with a scowl. "There are plenty of ready men out there more than willing to help you with that."

"No kings. None so pretty," she lilts, her grin playful and a little mocking.

He's really sick of people calling him that. He sets her hand free with a slight thrust and turns away. Muttering, "You're fearless, I'll give you that." He's trying very hard to not be cruel, to not take out his aggression on her after she'd worsened his worry for his wife. "You remember the last time you tried this idea? Would've thought the dragon scared you away for good."

"Dragon's not here, is it?"

This one's as incorrigible at not taking no for an answer as Ygritte had been, but she's got Dany's silvery coloring. If he were a completely different man, he could take the comfort she's offering after such a devastating day. He could lose himself in a beautiful woman's body and put the battle behind him for the night at least. If he flipped her around, it'd even be easy to delude himself she's Dany. But he's not that man and the desire never even flickers.

The thought in his head is enough to make his stomach unsettle. Yet he can almost hear Dany's laughter, how she'd tease him for being so dour, prudish, boring, she'd say. Right from the start, she'd always loved how easy it was to make him blush. She'd gotten evil delight out of seeing him uncomfortable. Aye, she'd surely have her fun at his expense for this, but he's got no doubt that she'd also put the fear of gods into the woman encroaching her territory.

Thinking that leaves his voice warmer than it would've been otherwise. "I'm sorry. I've a wife. You damn well know that."

"Aye, you've a wife now, from today. But your wife's not here," she says sympathetically. "What's the likeliness she'll come back?"

Any goodwill he'd held onto evaporates. Anger lashes heat through him and Jon whirls, scowling, stalking slowly towards her, forcing the wildling warily backward. The dangerous quiet he normally keeps masked is bared and he doesn't try to hide it. She shouldn't have said that. None of them should think that. After a tense moment, he raises his arm over her head, the flash in her eyes wondering if he'll hurt her. He lets her think it, but he won't. He wouldn't hurt a woman if he didn't have to. He takes the flap of the tent and pulls it aside, exposing her back to the biting wind.

"Go," he commands. "Don't ever do this again."

"Suit yourself," she says, but there's a little tremble in her voice.

Jon stares after her longer than he should, still upset, still unsettled. When the flap is tied closed
again, he turns around and kicks the Dothraki brazier over into the snow before he can help it, dancing fire extinguishing, leaving him in the dark cold.

Tells himself, She'll come back. She's still out there. She's fucking fine.

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Her back bows off the bed, a scream ripping from her scraped throat. Pain has lanced through her veins. Terror, absolute, crawling along her skin. That sensation of horror and helplessness, that voice in her head that makes no sense, screaming, Go, go, you have to get away. You have to fight. Don't let him—

She'd been remembering. She'd been dreaming, remembering a feeling, a paralyzed moment. Something … happened. Did it? Something … what? She can't remember. She can't understand. But the feeling is choking her.

When she reaches unthinkingly, Daenerys winces, biting down on the flare in her torn shoulder, wrist catching the restraint of her sling. She uses her free arm this time, pulling at the bedding over her, pulling it down to her stomach, pulling aside the lapels of her borrowed shift. The skin of her fingertips has been scrubbed away by Drogon's horn, but she strokes them over her collarbone anyway, trying to find some normalcy, some familiarity in the sensation. She snags on the mangled mound of flesh at the edge of her left breast. She snags over it and hisses, teeth clenched, hurting and wondering. Scared. Desperate. Breath sticks in her lungs. Ice like a thousand stabs in her blood. She reaches for the bedside stand, fumbling to grasp the small mirror cast aside there.

Something is so wrong.

She remembers the old man's words, when Drogon's blood had been washed away, revealing the ugly black gash ripping her chest open. On her chest, over her heart, a cut of twisted raised flesh that doesn't bleed. Brand new, but like scar tissue. "What happened here?!" he'd exclaimed. "I've never seen a fresh wound like this." Dread in his low tone, "It looks necrotic…"

Perhaps it is. Perhaps it's old. Perhaps it happened in the fall. She doesn't know. She can't remember. But it burns, it burns horribly, and it doesn't bleed.

It burns. And it's sharp. Sharp like glass turning around inside her body.

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Castle Cerwyn is nowhere near the scope of Winterfell, but it's a vital resting stop along the way as all that's left of the living's frontline retreats. Hosted by Lady Jonelle, last of her House still standing, they wait to meet with the divisions recalled from Torren's Square a short ride west from there, sending ravens to Hornwood as well to start them southerly. Troops encamped for acres outside the castle, all the divided armies that'd been strict to keep their camps separate before, the bickering battalions now all mixed up together, blended in the battered exhaustion of having faced down death together and not come out wholly victorious.

By the time the very end of the marching soldiers arrives and folds in, the caravan of civilians has moved on. Aimed at Riverrun, instructed to set up their support base there and continue assisting. Sansa leads them, he discovers, though he'd left that mantle to Arya. Because Arya has stayed behind, waiting on her brother.

"Sent Sansa and Bran ahead," she explains when she tracks him down among the arriving men. "They should be as far away from the front as possible."
"I told you to watch over them."

"Ghost's with them," she counters, "And Lady Brienne," then reminds him, "You assigned the Mother's Men to guard the caravan. They're in no danger."

He wanted to speak with Bran. He wanted to ask him what he sees. Where is she? What happened when the two dragons disappeared into the sky? The thought of catching up to his brother and finding those answers is all that's held him on. It's taking all the sense he has to resist the wild instinct to jump on a horse and ride into the white, blindly searching. Now he has nothing, nothing but desperate faith.

Made a little more desperate as he watches Missandei break through the bodies blocking her path, pitching to a run when her eyes land on Grey Worm where he walks painstakingly beside the king. Out of her character, unheeding of his bandaged chest or slung arm, she jumps onto him, elbows around his neck, gripping him tight. Shock or his injuries make him stagger back as he catches her, but he doesn't wince at the impact or buckle under her weight, feet just shy of the ground.

Right there, she kisses him. Pushing him through his stiffness into a melting relief, pushing him to ignore the gawking men around them. Jon's never seen this side to her. War makes for change.

After the necessary arrangements are handled, he ends up in the command tent, in the royal camp, surrounded by loud voices again, arguing again, blaming each other and everything else they can think of for where they went wrong. He tries to quell them, frustratedly cutting in, "No battle plan survives contact with the enemy. We may not have come out ahead, but we've landed a hard blow."

"One army," Arya counters, gaze unfocused, her mind far off somewhere.

He turns to the corner his sister takes up with a frown. "What?"

"Just something Bran said. One army, a real army, united behind one leader, with one purpose. I'm not sure what he was getting at, but I took it at face value. One army, no confliction, driven by one head. That's the strongest force. We've been taught that we're stronger together, that the pack survives, so we've scrambled to bring in as much of our brethren, even our rivals and enemies, and we've spread control thin and suffered for it."

"Control is not thin," Grey Worm sternly disagrees.

Qhono is harsher, "Khaleesi the one head."

Arya coolly tips her chin at his hostility. "She may be at the top, but she's not the only head."

"Your Dragon Queen's not the top," Commander Vance provokes, turning his body towards the Dothraki in open aggression. "Maybe of you easterners, and the Dornish and Reachers may have rolled over, but we've our own king, the rightful king. He's not some foppish consort."

"This is exactly what we're talking about," Jon rebukes.

"Our army is no army," Missandei tells him, soft but confident, her dark soulful eyes intent on the king, "because we are strangers to each other, with competing goals and values and disciplines. We are learning to fight together, but not learning soon enough, or well enough, to conquer this unprecedented war."

He nods solemnly, lets her words sink gravity into the stubborn egos of the men, lets the silence that follows speak for itself.
They've suffered so greatly through this War for Dawn precisely because of such relentless animosity, because their sprawling host of soldiers and survivors has been in disarray, a House divided. But not anymore. The lords may've not learned their lesson at Winterfell, but from what he's witnessed through the camps, the people have.

Late into the night, once the others have all left him, Jon is just about to turn in when someone slips through the flap. An eerie voice, familiar voice, "Jon Snow."

He spins to find the Red woman watching him. Ice runs his veins, hardening him from weary to unwelcoming. "What are you doing here, witch? I told Davos I'd hang you if you ever showed your face. For what you did to Princess Shireen. And the countless other innocents you burned for your damned fire god."

Undaunted, Melisandre asserts, "I'm here to help you, my king. I've seen a most terrible vision in the flames…"

The world remains disorienting for Daenerys. Hurt and feverish, her moments of clarity are far between. She gets lost in her tether to Drogon, she gets lost in her memory and her fever dreams and a mangled mash of them both, she gets lost in the darkness. Mostly, she has no idea what's going on, where she is, what's happened, where these feelings of urgency and panic and longing are coming from, why this terror eats at her. Sometimes, she knows. She's stranded, hiding herself and her behemoth child, sheltered from the killing frost and storms. Taking refuge in the ruins of this Widow's Watch, greeted by the remnants of House Flint that'd refused to flee until it was too late.

For now, she's safe. For now, all she can do is endure.

Widow's Watch, she reminds herself. Widow's Watch.

That name, it had better not be an omen.

In one of her clearer moments, she realizes there's a girl above her, a bowl in hand, levering broth down the queen's throat by the sip. It's not strong broth. It's mostly water. But it's warm and it's welcome. When it's empty, the girl tucks her lank brown hair behind her ear and gets up to leave.

"Wait," she rasps, stopping her halfway to the door. She's in a bed, in a cold stone bedchamber, heavy drapes drawn to block out the light. She's in a strange place, in a lot of pain, and she wants the sun. She wants company. "Uncover the window," she requests, a sore hand wrapped in dirty bandage points weakly towards it. "It's so dark in here. I don't want it dark."

"I could build the fire higher," the girl suggests, hesitant to oblige. "The drapes are to keep the cold out…"

"Please."

"Yes, Your Grace," she gives in, head ducted. She speaks softly, timidly, moves in small motions, everything about her mousy. And calming.

When the sun is let in, she starts to go again, and again Daenerys stops her. "What is your name?"

"Betha, Your Grace," she answers, half turned away, "Lady Lyessa is my mother."

"You're the heir to House Flint. Why are you here? Why did you not go with the exodus?"
"My mother..." Her quiet voice dies off, her shy eyes cast towards the queen, and she takes a breath. Turning to face her, she explains, "My mother hasn't been right since she lost the baby. She hasn't left her rooms in a year. She won't go. I cannot leave her." Moving closer, encouraged. "My brother Robin was slain beside King Robb at the Red Wedding, you see. When the illness swept through the castle, my Lady Mother was nearly ready to deliver. She fell ill and her last son was stillborn. So I'm all that remains. I cannot go without her and she will not abandon Widow's Watch. This is our home, all we've ever known, where her children were born."

The Young Wolf, they called him, Robb Stark. Her good-brother now. Dead, but not forgotten. At his name spoken aloud, Jon's voice whispers in her memory, his fingers ghosting down the aching skin of her back, telling stories of his favorite brother. Missing him. Feeling as if he'd failed him. Gods, she wishes Jon was here. She hadn't realized just how heavily she'd come to rely on him in this last year. To hold her up, to take care of the burdens and responsibilities that fell on her, that which she'd been bearing alone all her life without him.

Now it's just her again.

Distracted by her longing, she almost misses the girl's words. She struggles to concentrate, to piece together what she'd said, to find her own voice. "You can't stay here indefinitely. You won't survive."

"We're northerners. We can survive winter."

Reflective, somber, "A stillborn... That's a hollow grief no one but a mother could comprehend. Talk to her, Betha Flint. Convince her to get up and move forward. For her last child's sake. For the child she has that's still alive. Keep talking to her. Even if you think she's not listening. Just keep talking."

"Yes, Your Grace."

"Will you sit with me?" Daenerys asks, eyes hooding, cheek pressed to the coarse pillow beneath her, feeling like a mountain of snow sits on top of her, crushing her. She wants the girl to join her on the bed. She wants to feel her body heat. She wants to have her soft small voice to focus on while the darkness swamps.

Pity and remorse and surprise and reluctance flickers over her face. "I'm sorry, Your Grace," she says, already taking a step backward. "I have chores. There's no one else to do them."

"Alright," she sighs. "Thank you."

When she's gone, there's nothing left to distract her from the emptiness. The silence is oppressive. The pain is consuming. Her gaze falls to the bedside stand, to the glint of gold under the sunlight, and she winces as she stretches her free arm outward. Every tiny joint and bone in her fingers aches, stiff and frozen, ice still crisping in her veins, turning the whole of her body's insides brittle. She catches the chain and pulls it off the edge, dragging it closer. She gets Arya's medallion clasped tight in her bandaged palm and brings it to her throbbing chest.

The High Priestess ascends with grace and unnerving intensity, fixed on the queen, and each step she takes of the long climb up the Great Pyramid dais leaves Daenerys a little more wary. But she doesn't stop her. As always, she finds herself inexplicably captivated by the woman's dark eyes. She lets her ascend, she lets her lay a transgressive hand over the queen's swollen stomach, watching the way her exotic features react to the things she's feeling, seeing, knowing.
Kinvara says, "He will be a man of greatness, your son," with a reassuring smile.

It's the only thing she wants to hear, but Daenerys has been burned too many times by witches and fortunetellers and prophecies. Their words meant nothing for Rhaego's fate, so she will not unguard her heart. Coolly, she returns, "Let us hope."

"You have your hope, my queen, but I have promises from the most powerful god left of this world." Her hand smoothes over her stomach, up between her breasts, lingering over her heart. Those dark eyes flicker.

No one else would've gotten this far, touched her this way, but there's something about the Red woman. Despite her skepticism and scorn, Daenerys craves to know what she has to say, what little she chooses to reveal. And besides, if she didn't, she might still allow her leeway, because she is very aware just how much support from the highborns the Red Temple has swayed to her side. Whether she can be trusted is an unanswerable question, so is whether she is right and true about anything she believes, but she needs the High Priestess to keep her faith in her.

"There are many among us who believe you are merely blessed by R'hllor, a messenger sent by our Lord to lead us through his eternal struggle against the Great Other, the god of darkness and cold and fear and evil and death, to our Lord's love and light and joy and cleansing."

"The Prince or Princess That Was Promised. Yes, you've told me."

"I believe Daenerys Stormborn walks through the fire because she is the fire. I do not have faith in the stories from Asshai," Kinvara confesses. "I have come to believe you are more."

"What do you mean?" Softly, breathless, stuck in her fervent eyes.

"More than a messenger, more than just a hero. Your blood of Old Valyria is powerful, no doubt, but it is not all of what you are. Contained within this body is a potent magic, one the dragonlords of old could only dream of. I would say you are not blessed by R'hllor, but embodied of him. Born of him, his self or a sliver of his essence, in the time we need him most, to face his greatest enemy."

The queen swallows, breaking herself from captivation, lips curving with a faintly mocking smile. "Is that all? You're not the first to call me a god, priestess, but I had hoped you weren't so foolish as them."

Instead of insulted, Kinvara's expression warms with affection, the human touch returning to her cryptic mysticism. She presses firmer where her palm is splayed over her heart and lifts her second hand to cup her pregnant middle again. The coolness of her low murmured tone suddenly becomes fierce. "Our enemy's magic is ice and death, strengthened in the darkness, in the night. Yours is fire and life, thriving in the light, in the day, in love. Your power comes from your love for your children, all of us who are your children, your love for this child," she says, and Daenerys feels a hard kick in her womb beneath the priestess's palm that makes her gasp. "You were born in the storm, in the night, within his grasp, and for all those years you waned from it, but you flourished in the fire, in the bright unforgiving heat of the desert that's withered so many down where you grew strong. Fire and life, my queen, fire and life. With the fire, you cleanse and empower us. You give life."

"I take life is what I do," she argues, trying like hell to fight off the warmth and pride and hope she's inspiring in her, because she knows it ends in heartbreak. "I kill, I destroy, even when I try to build." Tears in her eyes, voice hard and sharp and shaking, "And when this child dies before it takes its first breath, you will see that too."

Sympathy in those dark eyes, a softening, but her smile is certain and unafraid. "You will see what I
see only when you are ready. When you prove yourself wrong from all your fears, and right from all your wants, in the end." She strokes her hand from chest to shoulder, fingers grazing sensually down the queen's bare arm until she bands her wrist and lifts it in emphasis. "If I were to take a blade and part this flesh, the blood that would spill could do for me anything I would ask it. A boundless fuel for my magic, for my spells, for my will."

"Red woman would be dead before she tried it," Grey Worm warns her from his place at Daenerys's shoulder.

He's been so quiet, so steady, so faithful, she'd almost forgotten he was there. But he's always there, unless she sends him somewhere else. The leader of all her Unsullied shouldn't be spending his time as Queensguard, a simple task so many others could and do fulfill. But it's what he chooses, what he prefers, whenever his duties elsewhere permit it. Him at one shoulder, Missandei at the other. Unless she asks them to go, and she does that often, must do that or else they would never allow themselves to live a little of their own lives.

"She will not cut me," Daenerys assures him, staring still at Kinvara's enigmatic expression. Her tears remain, but her smile is amused. And intrigued. Always intrigued with this one. "She would request, and I would deny."

"Another thing I know, Your Grace," she says then, turning the captured wrist, thumb stroking over the vein. "One day, far in the future, I will ask, and you will grant, and we might possibly do something marvelous with that spilt blood."

"Perhaps."

When she releases her wrist, the priestess taps gentle fingertips under Daenerys's chin and leans in, slowly enough to be easily stopped. She kisses her lips just barely, tasting her in a way that is sensual but has nothing to do with attraction. Lingering there so they can feel each other's breath, she says, "You've the flavor of my Lord, as I hoped. And as you've hoped, you will see fruition as well." When she pulls away, taking a step blindly backward down the dais, she promises, "Nothing comes easy for you, my queen, but it will all come."

Daenerys watches the High Priestess leave, finding herself deeply disturbed. In the echoing silence, she tells herself, "The witch is delusional. A fanatic."

Behind her, Missandei is troubled by something else. "You don't truly believe your babe will die before it is born, do you?"

She turns around to face them both, her dearest friends, looking to the woman that is more her sister than her servant. "My first babe did. And if witches and their words are to be believed, I will never birth a living child. One witch says so, this witch says no, so what should I think? What should I know?"

The frown furrowing Missandei's brow makes her smile sadly, but she won't pretend she isn't terrified and despairing on this matter. That it hasn't consumed her thoughts since before she even stopped denying she was with child.

Worried, Grey Worm tells them, "Red woman say Daenerys Stormborn is god, meant to fight other god. If this true, how is this one meant to protect her?"

"They're just stories," she comforts. "Stories people tell each other to give meaning and make sense out of the chaos. I'm flesh and blood, just as you are."
"I not make dragons or walk in fire."

"And if what you saw in the far west is true," Missandei jumps in, "I wonder who is to say these creatures made of ice and death were not sent by the Great Other? Where else would they come from?"

"I don't know," Daenerys answers, turning from them in defeat, sinking to her bench to get off her aching soles again. "This world is full of all kinds of different magics, my friends. It always has been. There is so much that cannot be explained, but that is the way it has always been. Please don't let preachers scare you."

Missandei says, "We fear for you, Your Grace. We do not fear for ourselves."

Grey Worm adds, "We know Daenerys Stormborn protect us."

For the first time, she hears that not as the people say of their king or queen, but as the devout say of their Lord of Light. And she doesn't like the sound of it.

She's been thinking of this ever since she returned from Westeros, learning of this Essosi religion's first edict, the parable of what they stand for. Lord of Light, Heart of Fire, God of Flame and Shadow lay on one side of an endless war for dawn. On the other lay his counterpart, the Lord of Darkness, Soul of Ice, God of Night and Terror. Those that follow the Red insist that is what this coming conflict is. The Long Night. That the monsters she saw Beyond the Wall are the cold children of this Great Other, a god whose name has never been spoken.

White Walkers, wights, mere servants to this deity.

She thinks on this, on all she's studied and sought answers for since her journey west, and she's wondered what she's come to suspect will be the most important question of all. Is that what the Night King is as well? A servant? Or is he, as Kinvara would say, embodied of a god?

Even as just fantasy from a fire priestess, Daenerys isn't sure how she feels about being an incarnate of the God of Flame and Shadow.
Chapter 21

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What Is Lost Is Never Saved

When she doesn't come back, Jon convinces himself Drogon has taken her to safety once more. To Dragonstone, to Essos, or south. Anything but the alternative. He focuses on what he can control, this campaign, their next steps, holding the frontline as best they can muster.

The armies move south towards the plains of the Barrowlands. They construct new blockades and dig trenches as reports trickle in of scattered hordes pushing past Winterfell as the wildfire dies out. The royal division soon ends up encamped around Barrowton, running the widespread infantry from there. Setting new supply routes with Sansa and Davos in the Riverlands, trying to keep contact with King's Landing and preparing them, positioning garrisons, intercepting the impossibly hard to find wights that seem to be ranging parties of their own and keeping them from getting back to their masters with intelligence on the living's movements.

All that and trying to keep them from destroying themselves.

One day, a squire fetches him from the command tent, and he follows the boy towards the commotion in the distance, trying to ignore her when the Red woman appears to chase at his heels. He doesn't have time for her or her cryptic zealotry. In fact, she'd already be hung if they didn't have enough killing going on already. It tears him. He needs to be true to his word, but he doesn't wanna help the dead. He feels they're doing that too much already.

Speaking of, This can't be good, he thinks, striding through a viper's nest about to strike. Dothraki men have gathered tightly together, facing outward, their weapons raised and ready, surrounded by dozens of fuming Westerosi. Swords and arakhs frozen at men's throats, shouting over each other, nobody understanding each other. A powder keg pushing closer and closer to igniting.

"Enough, enough," he yells, cutting through them. "Hey!" And when they quiet down some, he takes a hard line. "What the hell is going on here?"

"Those barbaric apes murdered Ser Lionel!" an older Vale Knight exclaims, red in the face, sword jabbing into the phalanx of arakhs. It causes another wave of Dothraki aggression to push a little forward, scowling, threatening. He's unintimidated, plenty of supporters at his shoulders. "Something must be done about this. He was a Waxley for fuck's sake. They must be punished! There has to be justice!"

"Justice," a Dothraki scoffs, and it takes a minute for Jon to recognize Aggo.

"Justice!" the chant rises up in the Westerosi crowd.

"Quiet," Jon reprimands, harsh before the bloodthirsty fighters, still trying to make sense of this. Addressing the Valeman, "How do you know they murdered him? Which ones of them?"

"Ask them! They'll tell you!" he insists, seeming more affronted by that than the murder itself for a second or so.

Jon turns to Aggo just as Missandei joins his side, making him glance her way, exchanging a wary look. It catches on his tongue, the question, and he has a brief flare of shame for that. But if Dothraki murdered a Westerosi soldier, there has to be justice. They'll have to be put to death. If not, all out
slaughter could erupt between the armies, all that progress gone in an instant, everybody reducing back to rival tribes. But if he does, it could provoke the khalasar to rebel. In the heartbeat before he asks, he's acutely aware of just how dangerous a moment it is to have with Dany missing. "Is that true? Will you tell me you murdered Ser Lionel?"

"True," Aggo grunts, giving him a steady glare, an easiness in his shoulders belying the way his arakh hovers restlessly. "Killed Wax man."

"Just you?"

A few looks get thrown about between the Dothraki around him, but Aggo says firmly, "Just I."

"They've no shame!"

"They think they can swagger around here doing anything they want!"

"On our land!"

As the soldiers shout, furiously stoking each other, Missandei exchanges a few quick guttural words with Aggo and the man beside him in their native tongue, both men shutting her down with sharp slants of their heads. Then to Jon, chin turning into him, a low tone at his shoulder, she advises, "Ask them why."

It's the next obvious question of course, but she gives him hope. Off the look in her eyes, he makes sure his voice carries loud and strong over the din. "Why would you kill that man, Aggo?"

He's one of Dany's kos. One of her original bloodriders, if Jon remembers right. He'd know better. If he's not covering for somebody, he's gotta have a good reason. Right? Good enough to diffuse this situation? Gods, he prays so. Tell me it was defense, he thinks. Tell me he attacked you. Tell me you had no choice. But what would that help? The Westerosi wouldn't believe it. They'll want his head no matter.

Before he can answer, the old knight snarls, "What do his excuses matter? He snuck up behind poor Waxley like a coward and slit his throat!"

Jon bites back the impulse to drop his face into his hands, dread and defeat already exhausting him, though he keeps stern and stiff, standing tall between them. Hoping it's enough to stay their weapons. He says, "Quiet. Let him speak."

Which only outrages the soldiers more. But they obey.

Then Aggo tells him, "Wolf Khal," beginning pointedly with that, eyes piercing knowingly into him, as if trying to remind him of something, "Khaleesi law. Females choose. When female choose no, male mount still, then Dothraki die for Khaleesi law. Metal men die too."

It takes him a second, sorting that out. "You're saying he assaulted someone?" Jon surmises, unsure.

"Says a savage," someone argues.

A little more in Dothraki tongue before Missandei raises her voice, calm but commanding. "Six men were present and attest to the attack. Rape is tolerated under no circumstance by Queen Daenerys. Aggo acted as our queen demands."

"Rape is not tolerated but murder is?!"
Meeting the gaze coolly of the man that shouted, she counters, "It is not murder when it is justified."

"Where's the one that was attacked?" Jon questions. "I'd speak with her."

"They're the ones that go raiding and raping everywhere!"

"No," she corrects, her expression never flickering, her posture never faltering. "Not since Queen Daenerys. Twenty-seven Dothraki men have been executed in the last moon for breaking this Stormborn law. Westerosi must not be exempt."

"Even if they're not lying, it's not for them to hand out judgment," a Riverlander captain interjects, more collected than his peers. "That's for the king. Or the knight's battalion commander."

Jon holds back his agreement, still trying to find a way out of this mess without inciting a massacre. Or losing control of the khalasar. And he can't help but understand where the Westerosi are coming from. A culture that had no concept of rape just recently, now the arbiter of its judgment? He sees the irony in that, but keeps it off his face. It's a volatile situation, leading the Dothraki. They follow him because their Khaleesi said so. But they're bred to only respect proven mettle, not words. The longer she's gone, the closer they come to revolting. He doesn't wanna worry about a bloody rebellion at worst, or at best an eruption of constant dominance fights.

When the girl in question is brought through the crowd, he recognizes her from the tavern in town. He'd visited it the first night they set camp here, to greet the locals, to encourage them to gather a caravan and ride south away from the frontline, despite their insistence of remaining with the host. A serving girl in a ragged dress and shawl, head ducked, shoulders hunched in on herself. He notes the cut on her lip, the bruising of her eye, the snarl of her unwashed hair. She comes forward only when the man behind her gives her a shove, dropping in front of him in a too deep curtsy, dropping like she'd wanted to drop to her knees and grovel in the mud but restrained herself at the last second.

"Your Grace," she rasps.

"You're safe," he assures her, "whatever you have to say." Then he commands, "Tell me the truth, girl. Is the Dothraki honest? Were you attacked by Ser Lionel?"

She's frozen for a good long minute, while men shuffle awkwardly around her, their raised weapons weighing on them, their hostilities beginning to muddle. Then she looks up, first furtively at Jon, then anxiously towards Aggo and his lieutenants, lingering on him, snagging when she tries to turn away. He seems unbothered by the whole thing, disinterested in her, yet there's something reluctant but powerful flowering on her face, some painfully earnest emotion that makes Jon need to look away. Her last glance is directed towards the angry knights. She swallows hard before finally saying shakily, "I told him I wasn't one of the whores, but he dragged me out back and..."

In that cracking pause, he hates doing this to her. But it has to be public. It has to be here in the middle of all these men stoked up for violence if he has any chance of swaying them to stand down.

"They heard me screaming, I guess, because they just appeared outta nowhere," she tells him, glancing back to Aggo. "He hooked that thing at his neck and pulled the knight off. It happened so fast. He was dead before I even got my skirts down. I don't think they... I mean, I'm not..." She sucks in a breath. "Please, Your Grace, they're not murderers." Then her chin drops again, digging into her chest, trying to hide her face from the ire all around her. Whispering, "They were just trying to help."

Before her silence has even properly settled, someone's arguing, "We're fighting for our lives out here! We're dying by the thousands! And you people are worried about a soldier having a little fun
with some farmer's daughter?"

The girl flinches as if she's been struck again and Jon's hand itches, landing on Longclaw's hilt. Before he can say something, others are joining in.

"These men are trying to save all of Westeros."

"They deserve a way to relieve pressure."

"They've earned it!"

"This is war! The rules are different."

"Waxley was a good boy! An honorable knight!"

"Evidently not," Missandei returns, the sharpest he's ever heard her, the coldest her eyes have ever gotten.

"Quiet," Jon commands again to the crowd, whiplash this time in his anger. Diplomacy no longer worries him. He's landed squarely on one side of this conflict. Forcibly gentle, he tells the girl, "Thank you." Then goes harsh again, gazing out over the men. "You're right, it is war. We're fighting for our lives here, we're dying, you're right. But we are fighting for each other. We are fighting for a better future for our people, the ones that can't fight for themselves. That means we don't turn on each other, no matter how bad the war gets. We protect each other."

"Exactly!" a Valeman yells.

But he cuts him down, eyes hard, "Especially the vulnerable among us. Like her." And that makes them backpedal, shuffle again, grudging to let go of their anger but shame beginning to creep in on some of them. "War or no war, law remains. Order remains in some form, in the most important form. We do not hurt the innocent it's our duty to shield. We do not desert."

He throws Missandei a look and she responds, stepping forward, offering an ushering hand out. "Come with me." Speaking softly as she walks the girl away from the dangerous crowd, "We'll have a healer look you over if you like. If not, we can at least have a hot meal out of the snow."

After giving them a moment to gain distance, Jon levels a measuring stare on Aggo and his comrades, on the Valemen and Riverlanders and Lannisters that've gathered. Tiredly, but determinedly, "Lower your weapons, all of you. There'll be no more bloodshed today." Harsher when they hesitate, "Your king commands it." Then he declares, "You're right, it falls on the king to decide the swing of the sword, but what's done is done. In this case, what's done was justice."

It takes too long, men moving too slow to obey, and comes with great resistance in their faces when the crowd disperses. And still there are a few knights, a commander, a captain or two, lingering nearby, waiting for a chance to accost him with their private protests and requests. He turns from them for now, focusing on the Dothraki before they run off back to their usual troublemaking.

"Tell your horde, Aggo," he orders, making the man's brow go up. "Tell them next time something like this happens, take it to the division commanders." And at his confused look, "The metal men's kos. The ones in charge. Take it to them to deal with. If they don't, bring it to me. But no more killing metal men, alright? We don't want war between the khalasars."

"But Khaleesi say—"

"I know, I do, but if she were here, she'd understand it's … more complicated. Take it to their kos
and they'll still be punished, but it won't be blamed on Dothraki. You understand?"

"I do," Aggo answers after a considering moment, clearly unimpressed, but he seems willing enough to concede.

It's a conversation Jon should've had foresight enough to have with Qhono far before this close call, should've had Qhono spreading to the entire khalasar.

Breaking down his preconceived notions has been a joint effort from Dany and her people, but with the Dothraki… He still finds himself leery. With good reason, he'd say. Warfare is everything to them. Their values, their instincts, it's all violent, bred into their bones. So far, they've seemed to abide Dany's reign, as foreign and unreasonable as it is to them, bearing it like heretic converts would a new religion. Reluctantly, bewilderedly, yet still devoutly. But it's a powder keg.

When he turns around in temporary relief, ready to take the reprieve however long it lasts, his lifting mood is brought up short. Melisandre stands before him still, in her weather inappropriate red dress, her unbound red hair spilling around her, hands folded in front of her, odd face serene. But the fire is in her eyes, the fervent surety that she means to convince him of, to make him a believer in.

"Have you thought on my instructions, Your Grace?" she prods.

"You don't belong here," he growls instead, hostile, dismissive, thrusting forward with spite, shoving past her. "You're not welcome."

Every time he looks at her face, he hears her deranged demand echoing and wants to drive Longclaw through her. You must kill her, Jon Snow.

If he hadn't known she was a monster from Davos's assessment, he'd have been enlightened that first night of her return. Barging into his tent, raving of visions in the fire. Insisting he was Azor Ahai come again and must… How'd she put it?

"You kill the Bride of Fire before the darkness claims her or she will end us all. Bride of Fire, Daughter of Death," she'd insisted, as if it proved her mad point. "Born in Death's grip, flowered as Fire's wife. She's been given the power to triumph over the Long Night, but she is fated to succumb to it, and when she does, that power will be in his grasp as well. You must end this, Jon Snow."

He'd have her hanged just for those words, if they didn't have bigger things to worry about at the moment, if he wasn't holding out hope in her … abilities. Though he still might.

She's not Fire's fucking wife, she's mine, he thinks.

"You are the one," the witch says again, following after him as he tries to leave her behind. "You cannot hide from your destiny. It will find you. The only question is whether you will fight it or embrace it. You will doom us all if you don't."

"Enough of your treasonous talk, Melisandre. Say something useful. Tell me where she is. Where can I find her?"

"She will return to you."

"Where. Is. She."

"I do not know."

"Then you're no use to me and the rope around your neck is growing shorter with every toxic word
you speak."

"Blood of the wolf. Son of the North." She never listens. Grabbing at his arm to stop him, she spins into his path to look up into his eyes with that fervency, leaning into him, her fingers digging at his flesh. "I've seen you in the flames. I've seen your dragon blood," she whispers, making him go rigid for a new reason, glancing darkly around them at who may overhear. "You are of R'hllor's children, just as she is, but also touched by ice. Raised by your Old Gods, blessed by them, I suspect. I've spent my life preaching our Lord of Light is the only true god, the only one to be worshipped and trusted, but now I see clearer. I see your Old Gods of the Forest play an important role in this fight. They are your protection."

"Which is it, witch?" he snaps, yanking free of her, scowling. Refusing to fall into her spell. "This is nonsense. Am I fire or ice? Is the ice evil and the fire pure? Or will the ice save us?" he scorns.

"Your sermons are unraveling."

"Ice and fire aren't so different, Jon Snow. They both burn."

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She's out in the cold. Snow beneath her, in the air above her, all around. It blurs the world into a fog of monochrome colors. And her eyes are burning, watering at the sting of the wind. When she cracks them open and waits for her vision to clear, the first thing she sees is how blue her fingers are, darkened against the white powder where they rest, seeing them like someone else's. She can't feel them. They're so cold, it's as if they're no longer attached to her. She can't even feel the burns anymore.

Groaning, coughing, she tries to push up. Fails. Tries again. Fails. She manages to flip herself eventually, getting her face out of the snow, falling onto her back. She blinks up at the sky, but she can't see it. It's not distinctive enough from the rest of the grey and whites. She coughs again on her next breath and the spasm makes pain cut into the numbness. She cries out.

"Daenerys..." someone whispers on the wind. A familiar voice, a boy's voice, and she twists her neck towards the sound, but there's nothing there. Nothing but the wind. And again, as if from a ghost, the voice calls, "Daenerys, you must listen."

Resistance hits like the strike of a hammer, fear and suspicion bringing her walls down around herself, panic at the reminder of what it was like to be trapped in her own mind, in her fever dreams by her open connection to Viserion, a vulnerability she can't outrun. The link to her dead dragon is still closed tight, but it's too familiar, that tug at her consciousness, like someone's magic trying to drag her into a dream. It's dangerous.

"Don't pull away from me," the voice says, stronger, louder, ringing clearer in her ears. "Reach for me. Hear me, Daenerys."

"No," she grits through her teeth, slamming everything remotely receptive inside of her shut, turned away, unwelcoming, disbelieving, rejecting. She won't be betrayed by her own mind, not ever again.

The voice fades, still calling for her, taken away on the wind, pushed farther and farther from her awareness. In its absence, she's shaken, bereft. To reassure herself, she pulls Drogon's connection closer, Rhaegal in extension, huddling into the protective warmth of her sons. But when she focuses on Dragon in her head, she realizes what she's been too distracted to until now. There's something wrong with him. He's in pain, more pain than she is, a molten tide of it like lava rippling over him, ebbing and flowing. But he's drawn himself into the dark to get away from it, shut out the world, ignoring his body, and in consequence...
He's defenseless.

In her mind, she sees a flare of shadow rising up from the snow, towering above him, casting over him, writhing into the sky like smoke. But it's not smoke. It's hard and sharp and cold. It's death.

Biting through her pain, Daenerys jams an elbow beneath her and arches up to search the blur for her black dragon. She left him behind, and he didn't follow, so far away now, out of her reach, but she sees him. She sees...

There's a figure standing under Drogon. Staring at his broken wing.

Perfectly still, it's a slice of darkening amidst the grey, nothing more. Not until it raises a hand and splays it to his hide. Then it turns from him, moving her direction with slow unnerving steps. In the figure's wake, ice begins crystallizing across Drogon's hide, crusting over him, encasing him. Panic in her throat, frustration at being helpless, desperation urging her, she drags herself through the snow, dragging her useless body with that one bruised elbow, trying to get away.

"Drogon," she cries, voice too weak, drowned out by the wind. She coughs, hardens, screams louder, "Drogon! Drogon, wake up! Drogon!"

But the dragon doesn't stir. And the darkness casts over her.

It takes too long to recall the girl's name. Her mind is thick, filled up with disorienting notions, imagined memories, terrorizing dreams. She stares at her as she sits in the corner, working with a needle, focused on her task, unaware that the queen has woken and is watching her all too intensely. Betha, it comes eventually. Lady Flint's daughter, who's been looking after her, and now seems to be mending her garments. Her silver wedding gown is lain on the foot of the bed, has been washed and sewn back together, not the same as it was, scarred just as Daenerys is now, but wearable. She appreciates that. In the girl's lap is the grey Stark cloak, Drogon's blood stained across the embroidered wolf's head.

"Drogon let you near him?" she asks, surprised, suspicious.

The girl startles, jerking slightly, catching her thumb with the needle. She hisses, sticks it in her mouth as blood wells. She spends a moment watching Daenerys right back, hesitant, as if measuring her. Then she says, "It took time to convince him. Yandel wanted to help. There wasn't much could be done. Took six men and a welding hammer to try aligning his wing. We all thought we'd be roasted, but he restrained himself, your dragon. He's a good boy. His leg will heal."

"Will mine?" she wonders softly, under her breath, to herself.

Betha saddens. "I hope so, Your Grace." Then she says, "His wing…"

"He'll fly once more," Daenerys declares. Insists. Refuses to entertain the alternative. Her son is not yet crippled. He will heal. They will both heal.

Don't want to wake the dragon, something in her knows, understands, hit with the jagged flashes of nonsensical imagery. Image after image of the strangest things. Random glimpses of random objects and vistas that somehow connect into an impression she instinctively comprehends as communication.
When he touches her. When he puts his hard ice hand to her cheek.

It doesn't burn like his spear had, searing away her skin, but it hurts all the same. And it opens something in her. Something almost like the strand of connective tissue that links her to her dragons. Some kind of magic.

She sees a glimpse of Drogon waking, breathing his fire across the ice, destroying. It would hurt, she realizes. It would hurt him, Drogon's fire. And he has no army with him now. He's just as stranded as she is. And Viserion, he left Viserion behind. Back in the white somewhere, waiting for him to return. But he walked forward through the white on his own, searching for her, following where he sensed she'd fallen. Because ... he wanted this. Because he has use for her.

She sees a glimpse of Drogon breaking free, cracking the ice that contains him. In that glimpse, she realizes he's not frozen solid, not gone. He's trapped, a shell of unnatural ice cast over him. It's taking a lot out of him to hold her child trapped under that ice. It's draining too much of his energy, that magic. He won't be able to continue it long. But he doesn't need long. He only needs a moment. He only needs long enough to...

"Jon!" she cries, a screaming sob wrenching her awake. Panic in her throat, terror, absolute terror. Powerlessness. Murmuring mindlessly, "Please, please."

And somebody else is saying that too, trying to get through to her, trying to make her focus on them, their face right above her, their palms on her shoulders, worsening her pain. "Please, please, Your Grace. Please stay still. You can't get up. You'll hurt yourself. Please. Queen Daenerys."

She's crawling, dragging herself backward on the ground, the snow. The Night King, and that's what he is, that's what she sees now, that figure, a monster made of ice and blue soulless eyes, draws ever nearer, slow enough to taunt her.

"Drogon! Drogon, wake up! Drogon!"

He lowers to one knee and she can't crawl anymore. She collapses, chest heaving, shuddering. He reaches slowly toward her and she slams her burned palm against his chainmail sleeve, trying to knock the hand aside. It keeps coming, unchanged by her desperate strength, and her fingers end up furled against the cold metal. He touches her cheek, flashes in her mind, stealing her frantic breath. Dread seeps through her, thickening her limbs, her thoughts, her heartbeat. Defeat coats her.

Behind her eyes, trees and grass and a shimmering lake. White bark, red leaf, bleeding faces.

"No," she whispers, voice cracked. Her hand goes up to his chest, shoving at him, barring, trying to keep him away. A faint flicker of her anger, depleted, but alive. "No!" she snarls. But the flashes continue, a flood of dizzying images, a barrage.

And the sudden sinking acceptance of something she's known all along, some part of her, somewhere deep inside, down in her bones, at the back of her head, in her archaic instincts.

Kinvara tried to tell her.

She'd known it when she stared at the dragon eggs in their weak fire, tears in her eyes, desperation screaming inside of her in a way she couldn't afford to scream out, fingers bunched painfully in the bedding as Drogo thrust into her from behind and all she had to cling to was that vague compulsion
the eggs of stone stirred in her. She'd known it when she felt Rhaego tear at her womb, watching the shadows dance out horrible stories on the sand silk tent, and then a strange calling, what felt like a promise or a warning, a great wolf and a man wreathed in flames. She'd known it when she sat down in the sand as Drogo's pyre burned around her, feeling the fire eat her alive, even as it left her skin unblemished and birthed her dragons. She'd known it for just a split second in the House of the Undying. She'd known it when she stood on a crumbling roof at Hardhome and watched Drogon cast fire across the walking dead. She'd known it when she shoved her hands into a boiling pot and hoped for her skin to slough off, Jon sleeping feverish behind her. She'd known it when she set the Dothraki temple alight and the dying screams of the khals she burned filled her ears, walking from the inferno, watching the people that'd twice enslaved her bow down, not just to their knees, but some bowing low until their brows touched the dirt.

In that moment, she'd thought, Yes. Yes! This is who I am.

In that moment, she'd felt the temptation form to fruition. She'd taken her first true taste of what she could conjure.

That thing inside of her she'd buried so deep and prettied up with half truths and distractions, that thing unfurled in the fire that night, naked and proud before the Dothraki with a vicious validation in the raise of her chin. Unfurling and stretching tall with the rise of smoke.

It was never the Targaryen in her, not like she'd thought. It was more than just the dragon. It was the Fire itself. It was the heat and the light and the life giving. It was the awful hubris of having the power inside of her to master the world.

The Night King sees that in her. He wants to take it for himself.

Dagger in his hand, arced over his head, the shiny black of dragonglass against the white of the sky above her. He drives it down as she screams, "Drog—"

It slides through her chest like it was meant to be there, stabbing into her heart. He twists the hilt. Breaks off the blade. Her hand pushing at him, stops, falls to the snow. She can't breathe. It's not a struggle to catch her breath, no burn in her lungs, no shudder. It's just … stopped. Everything in her, suddenly, sharply, just stopped.

He rises away. Steps over her. Walking into the white.

Leaving her to die alone.

Out of the corner of her eye, she watches him fade. Stares up at the sky, feeling everything drain away, feeling the intrusion, the glass lodged in her heart like poison. "Jon," she breathes out, when her last breath finally releases. She thinks she's dying. She thinks that's what this feels like.

But she doesn't die. She loses time. Her mind becomes white like the sky, like the snow, endless and edgeless, hazy and surreal. Confused. The ice tries to crawl over her skin, tries to blacken her like his, but the fire flares up inside, burning it away as quick and fierce as it tries to consume.

Just endure, a voice demands, whispering through the hush of the haze, a voice in the recesses of her muddled self. Weather it. Fight it like a fever. It can't take you. It's weaker magic than yours. Endure.

Right before she slips into oblivion, her heart strains futilely towards her son. The dragon shatters the ice around him with a roar, bucking wildly as he's freed. He swirls around, breathing fire across the deserted hilltop, searching for the enemy that's escaped him. Scorching empty earth.
"It seems your fever has finally broken for good this time," Betha tells her the next time she wakes. 

"Has it?" she sighs, not so certain. She still feels … hazy. Unnatural. 

The girl sets a fresh basin on the bedside and drags the blankets down to the end, tentative hands taking the queen's shift apart and soaking rags in the heated water to wash her. There's no proper bath. There won't be a bath for a long time, she's afraid. She can't be moved yet, not with her hip's healing so precarious, the best they've done being turning her carefully onto her side every now and again to avoid bedsores. If she wasn't lost in fever dreams so long, she'd have been driven mad by the infirmness about now. 

"We've been terribly worried. It's been so long. Yandel says he never saw a fever last so long. Either the body beats it or the infection kills you. But not you, Your Grace. You just kept burning up. For weeks now, burning," she murmurs, half to herself, trailing quieter as if she's forgotten she's still talking. 

"Your rookery?" Daenerys asks, painstakingly clearing her thoughts enough to have a logical one. "Have you sent ravens out? I must get word to Winterfell, to King's Landing. They must know I'm alive."

"The rookery was in the east wing, Your Grace. It went off the cliff side with the rest of the stone when it crumbled. Otherwise we'd have sent for help for you right away, you must believe me."

A quaver of trepidation in the girl's voice makes Daenerys reach up and lay a hand over her knuckles where they clench the dripping rag, stilling her ministrations. When she meets her eyes, she says, "I appreciate all you've done for me, Betha. You people are barely surviving here and yet you've gone to great lengths to help me when you didn't have to."

Looking scandalized, "Of course we had to! You're the queen."

Her smile is rueful. "There are plenty of Westerosi that would not let that stop them from leaving me out to die. In spite of that or especially for it."

"I wish we could do more," the girl laments. "To make you more comfortable, or help with your pain, or venture out to bring back help… There's nowhere to go. We've no horses, no ships, and no one has come back for us. We're forgotten."

"But we're still here," the queen reminds her, squeezing her fingers to make her chin lift off her chest. "We?"

"Yes, Betha, we. We're still here and we will persist. When I heal, I intend to return to my king and our fight. On foot if I have to, in the sky if Drogon heals before me. Either way, I will not leave without you all."

"I don't see how. Not even a dragon has drawn my mother from her bed."

While she's missing, her people's hope dwindles. Thinking she's dead, thinking their fight is lost. Jon pushes them on, does his best to hold the line, to keep the faith. Battles in the Barrowlands. Neither side has their dragon, it seems. Still, the odds are against them. He'd thought they'd landed such a blow at Winterfell, thought the wildfire swath would've turned the tide for them. But the dead keep coming, keep rising, graveyards of thousands across the North, new wights crawling out of the earth from sea to sea, centuries of corpses.
Their forces retreat to the Neck. The southern border of the North, the narrowest expanse of Westeros. It's all swamps and marshes and the worst terrain to wage battle out of, but they must hold it. If the dead get through them there, there'll be no stopping them then. There'll be no saving Westeros.

It's the best chokepoint they can ask for.

Jon sends riders to Greywater Watch, looking for the masked and always moving keep of House Reed, needing crannogmen to help them master the territory. Their knowledge of all the hidden causeways, streams, pathways, it would be invaluable. But the riders that return at all return empty-handed, at a loss for explanation. The little left of banners of the Neck had all been called up north and depleted in the early days of the war, and what had been left behind seems to have disappeared into the fog, leaving the bogs deserted of their natives.

Fleets fill up the bays on either side of them, Blazewater and the Bite, navigating glaciers for what's still passable, and besiege the dead from sea. The ruined fortress of Moat Cailin becomes a command center. It's a great asset for a northern defense, an impenetrable bottleneck when holding off the south, but it's not nearly as effective the other way around. Guerilla fighting, trench warfare, snakes and quicksand in a murky bog, no visibility, and then the swamps freeze over too.

In her dream, she's back in Meereen. In the Great Pyramid, Jaehaerys is in his crib, a babe again, restless but not wild yet. Her three dragons hang off the eaves of the veranda, bedchamber open to them and the night sky, a black to contrast the glitter of the stars and the heavy moon as it glows. The dry coolness of a desert night, the soft kiss of her silk gown, an overwhelming sense of contentment. Her people are peaceful, their economy is recovering, and everyone is free. There is no need for conquering, for looking outward, northerly, easterly, creating too many new enemies, seeking an empire strong enough to fight winter itself. There is no need to leave the Bay of Dragons. She could be happy here. Tonight, she is happy here.

And there's Jon.

When she wakes, it's to feel the strangeness that was absent in her sleep, to lose the normalcy of having her husband walk up the sandstone steps and join her looking into Jaeh's crib. How he'd snaked his arm around her waist and rested his chin on her bare shoulder with an unburdened sigh. No war to run off to, no Westerosi wanting to drive her away, no unbearable weight on her shoulders, crushing her down.

Lifting one hand above her face, she unwraps her bandage, lets it fall away as she examines the frostbitten burn marring her palm and fingers. Thoughtfully, idly, she studies the way it's beginning to scar, wondering what it will look like when it's finished. She wonders what the rest of her body will look like in the end, all these new scars. She wonders if the pain will ever go away, the aching in her shoulder, the sting of her hands, the excruciating throbbing up and down from her hip. On top of all that, she has Drogon's hurt as a constant presence in her head, especially his wing. His panic that it won't heal, that he won't ever fly again. And his hunger.

How can he hunt when he cannot fly? And he must hunt. To find food in this white wasteland…

Powerlessness crawls up her throat like a scream.

To distract herself, she reminiscences. Memories of Jaehaerys learning to walk. Feeling the rain for the first time on their harrowing sail from Meereen, a desert baby suddenly thrust into a new world, on the sea for so long, sick and nerves frayed, but then his wonder at landing in Sunspear with its tall
gold grass in the soft sand dunes, then Dragonstone, the wet beach, the rocks, the green. His excitement and shock at all the new experiences, a little adventurer exploring new lands, new sights, new weathers, loving it all, always ready for more.

She'd have liked to take him north, shown him Winterfell's moors and the Wolf's Wood and the Stark's heart tree. To teach him to swim in the hot springs. It's half his roots and she hates that he never got to see Winterfell in all its glory before Viserion did so much damage.

Did they beat back the horde without her? Did they shore up Winterfell's broken defenses? Is Jon already at work rebuilding the ruined stone of his home? Or did they have to use the wildfire? She hopes they didn't. She hopes they salvaged something, for Jon's sake, for Arya's, for Jaeh's.

Softer memories of making love with Jon comfort the ache in her chest. She closes her eyes and can feel the weight of his harder body pressing down on her. She always liked tightening her arms around his neck and pulling him as close as possible, keeping him there even after he'd finished, liking how he'd crush her, even when it got hard to breathe under him and he'd complain for her sake. But the last few times, she hadn't been able to stand it. It'd hurt too much, her breasts too sore, so she'd flip him over and ride him instead, not mentioning why.

She remembers playing with Jon's hand, earlier on in their tentative relationship, running a fingertip along the scar tissue, secretly thinking, *Marked by fire, this one. Meant for me.* As they'd lain in the grass beneath the waterfall, thinking that, resigned to it not being true, his words in her ears already breaking the fantasy, reminding her that he had to go back. But it didn't stop her from feeling it, holding onto it. *Marked by fire. Meant for me.*

Carrying her House on her back all this time, all on her own, it's been exhausting. It's influenced her decisions in ways it probably shouldn't have, in ways she wished it hadn't always. The eons of Targaryen men and women, the great many, and the few awful… The high heights…

When she learned the truth, she'd hoped Jon could help bear the weight of their House and its restoration that'd been her dreaded obligation for so long, but he's not ready. Perhaps never will be. Perhaps it's just not right for him, not his real truth.

Ygritte wanted him to be a wildling. Daenerys wants him to be a Targaryen. Arya wants him to be a wolf. The North wants a Northman, a Stark, purebred, not tainted with dragon blood. She'll not make him feel that way, not from her, as if he's disappointing her by being true to himself instead of what others expect.

She'll carry her House on her own, as she's always done.

Her eternal inner conflict, torn between the duty to restore her family's legacy and her desire to forge a new path. To dismantle or to build upon…

For whatever good they'd brought to the world, the older she's gotten, the more of the world she's experienced, she's realized her bloodline is soaked in the very principles she's fought so hard against. And also been so deeply a part of, as much as it bothers her to acknowledge. They came from glory and great power, yes, but they came from colonizers and slavers. That's where her blood began, in Old Valyria, and continued into the construction of the Seven Kingdoms in some form or another. Powerful people struggling for more power against other powerful people while the vulnerable masses on the ground were overlooked, while they were made collateral in strife they had no part of, no say in or escape from.

Dragons fighting each other in the sky, killing thousands on the ground.
She'd intended to be the opposite of all that, to change everything, doing things differently. Instead, look at what her intentions have led to. Whatever the roots of her choices, she's left more destruction in her wake across this world so far than probably all her ancestors combined.

"Jon Snow," she whispers, dropping her palm to her chest, laying scar over scar.

King Consort to the Dragon Queen and her Stormborn reign, they could say, their history books might write. But ruler in his own right to three kingdoms, the North, the Vale, and the Riverlands. She allowed him not to bend the knee and relinquish his seat in the end, not because she loved him, but because he was their chosen king, not their captor as Cersei Lannister and the Essos masters had been.

Will they know him as Rhaegar's son or Ned Stark's? What will they know her as? An ill fated queen that tried to create something wonderful? Or will she be the villain in their books? Or worse, a forgotten girl, exiled, who flared bright for a short time before dying back into obscurity?

They don't tend to remember women in this world, unless they were beautiful victims whose tragedy spurred their heroic men forward.

Queen Nymeria is the first she thinks of, Princess of the Rhoynar, who led her people to exile from Essos after being conquered by the Valyrian Freehold. But even that story ends with her throwing away her power on a husband's behalf, burning the very ships that had given her freedom in the first place.

Daenerys spends a lot of time staring at the medallion Arya made for her, keeping it close, gaining comfort, considering. It's not just a trinket. An overlaying of their sigils to remind her that she's not alone anymore. It means so much more. And she would like if it meant even more than that. She would like if it meant a joining of their Houses. Truly joining. It feels like the right path. All that's left of the Targaryens are her and Jaeh, and all that's left of the Starks are Arya, Sansa, and Bran, with Jon torn between them. Two Great Houses at the edge of extinction. Depending on which of them all survives this immediate war, and the lasting winter to come…

She would like if her marriage to Jon was more than just the two of them. Marrying their Houses, strengthening together. She wonders how Jon would feel about that. His siblings would be Jaeh's heirs. A restoration. More importantly, a new way forward, breaking the pattern of the Targaryen bloodline and its hoarding of power. Of course, diluting the bloodlines might mean losing their connection to the dragons, but it might also usher in a new era, might come with unexpected gifts. And perhaps it's time for that anyway. Perhaps trying to hold onto the dragons when all the signs were telling them to let go was what became their downfall.

The question that haunts her is the worry for them. Is she wrong to want this? Will it turn her from the path of restoring the dragons, leaving them to die out again? If she chooses this, will Drogon and Rhaegal be the last? Should they be?

Can dragons fit into a wolf pack? Have they already?

Around the war table, Jon looks into the wearied faces of the men and women he's come to know in the heat of battle and the quiet of starving cold winter nights, where food is scarce and sleep is restless, and the wounds never heal and the enemy never gives up. The last of the troop leaders still standing, they surround his table today, summoned all together for a summit below the blockade, the rare occurrence required despite the risk, despite the trouble. They update their secured intelligence, they bandy strategies, and they trade arrangements on smaller conflicts.
Beyond the crumbling stone of the Children's Tower where he's built his war room, soldiers huddle around fires, in tents, pacing sentries, ranging parties, hunters, tenders, defenders, aimless wanderers. Sharing gallows humor and hollow comfort. Waiting hopelessly for the wagons from the south to arrive with provisions that could keep them alive. Grain, weapons. All of Westeros is forging dragonglass and yet there's never enough. It breaks too easily. Too many empty hands in need.

Queen Yara was called, but didn't come. She's at sea, commanding the Greyjoy fleet and all its absorbed additions from their fellow fleets that've been broken. She's currently locked in a game of cat and mouse with the coastal hordes along the Rills, using her own discretion in deciding when to send raiding parties ashore to battle on foot and when to attack from their ships. She's had unexpected luck with that, rousting smaller hordes out from inland, herding them towards the water. He has no choice but to trust her judgment in that, since he's found there's no telling Yara Greyjoy what to do. Especially after Dany granted her sovereignty once Cersei was dead.

Of the seventeen thousand ironborn they began this war with, the notorious raiders are down to six thousand. Their ships even worse off.

Grey Worm, of course, is at his side. Commander of what's left of the Unsullied legion, a little less than five thousand, excluding the Mother's Men and the contingent stationed on Dragonstone. Brown Mutt stands behind him now, the Unsullied lieutenant commander usually kept invisible among his ranks. Lady Trianna lingers a little closer to Missandei than necessary, wedging herself between the Unsullied and the Naathi pair. Her Volantis battalions have weathered well, still upholding at around their original seven thousand.

There's Admiral Serry, a hard-faced old woman from the Shield Islands of the Reach, a fleet commander sixty ships strong, under a thousand sailors left to man them, but she's taken command of several factions of the Stormborn armada now that so many have gone leaderless, those too intact to be absorbed by Yara like the rest of her strays. To her left, Lord Royce represents his nine thousand Vale knights. To her right, Lord Vance is out in the field guiding his eleven thousand Riverlanders while Edmure Tully keeps the kingdom afloat in Riverrun.

The only ones not too agitated to take chairs are the Essosi trio he's least familiar with. Captain Rohanne, a Tyroshi noblewoman with blue hair and a painful looking piercing through the bottom of her nose, who took the reins of the Disputed Lands raiders. Frae of Sarnor, another fleet commander, this one a timid girl that can't be older than fifteen, which just baffles him. A roughneck like Yara or a fierce experienced lady like Serry, he can understand keeping ships full of seafarers and marauders in line. But this kid? And at her hip, the Ghiscari freerider that wrangles the remnants of Dany's mercenary guilds. He leans in too close, harassing her with jokes and invitations under his breath between parrying, given her expression of long suffering indulgence. Merdak, Master of Mercs has become his informal royal title.

Normally, they'd have no recourse if a sellsword army decided to turn tail and abandon their hirers, but this is a war of extraordinary measures. Those of the guilds that try to desert get conscripted, pushed to the front with the rest of the deserter's army. Merdak has been surprisingly adept at keeping his self-serving brethren in the fold since conscriptions began. Nobody wants to be at the front in this one.

His last count was four thousand. Seven if they count the peacekeeping forces spread through Westeros and the mass migration leaders still ferrying civilians eastward, guiding them into the Dothraki Sea.

Crownlands and Westerlands combined, they're down to ten thousand, discounting the battered fleets out of Lannisport. Leadership in their lower seats has fallen to Lady Darklyn and Lady Westerling,
the last of their Houses that aren't infirm men or children too young to be at war. And the Stormlands, what with many of their minor Houses in open rebellion, and those not openly still not to be trusted, there's no Stormlander here to represent his kingdom.

There would be a Dornishman attending, most likely one of the Sand Snakes, given that Dorne is and had been the staunchest Targaryen loyalist of all the kingdoms, but they're irrelevant here. The Dornish are all but untouched, concentrated mostly in the deep south, occupied by the Marcher insurgents. One army needs to be spared, a last resort if they perish in the north. By the looks of things, even if they win, by the end of this, Dorne will be the only intact military force left on the continent.

The Reach has nineteen thousand surviving soldiers of its Tyrell host under Commander Hightower and his lieutenant Lord Rowan. They've more than halved their men in the northern battles before Winterfell. Too many of them were unblooded. If it could've been afforded, he'd have kept them from the front, replaced their numbers with more seasoned fighters. But they had the strongest force of all Westerosi, rivaled by the Stormborners only in the Dothraki khalasar. They were needed at the front.

If he could've convinced Dany to let him, he'd have had the Dothraki ahead of them, greater numbers, better fighters, battle tested. It would've been the smarter positioning. But she wouldn't hear of it. She'd brought her Essosi west to help, yes, but not to pad the frontline. She would not order her immigrants to stand between the natives and their enemy and die for their land for them. She wasn't wrong morally, he does understand the sentiment, but logistically, tactically, it frustrates him still.

Chieftain Barik and Chieftainess Karsi head the remaining nine hundred Free Folk. Against them and their whole society teetering at the edge of extinction is the three hulking Dothraki in a cruel reminder of what they could've been, if they'd gotten better luck, if they'd managed to escape in time. If not for the Night's Watch, Jon tries not to think, true as it is, banishing the sentiment away. General Qhono, Ko Temmo, Ko Jhogo, needing translation more often than not from the gracious Missandei, representing their horde that's still a remarkable eighty-eight thousand strong. The bulk of which still sits at the Crossing. They brought up as many as the roads could hold to help them fight at Winterfell, and even more after its fall to help them hold the blockades in the Neck, not to mention the khas of five thousand left in the Stormlands dealing with rebels, and yet…

He tries to not be small-minded, but Jon still can't help feeling that this is what they're made for. They thrive in blood and mayhem, built for violence, their whole existence revolves around it, proving that. He wishes again Dany had listened, to him, to Tyrion, to the rest of the lords. He wishes he could've brought the whole overwhelming force of the khalasar up to the Wall and had them thin out the undead horde. He can't help but wonder just how many less Westerosi would be lost now.

If she knew his thoughts on that matter, his queen would be disappointed in him. But some facts are inescapable.

Out of everyone, the wildlings and the North and the Vale and the Riverlanders have suffered the highest count of casualties, been decimated the hardest, just by the grace of their kingdoms being first grabs in the undead army's march southerly. In response, it's made them even more intensely resentful and antagonistic towards the southerners and the foreigners that take up space around them. Drunken fights, violent disputes, clashing between the tribes like he witnessed when Aggo killed a Valeman in Barrowton, none of that volatility has resolved itself. He's done his best to mitigate it, Missandei and others devoting more of their time to soothing infighting than on the war itself. Yet nothing improves relations.

"From the beginning, this fight has come down to nature versus politics,” he'd said recently,
confiding in Davos and Missandei as they'd sat commiserating around a fire. "We've failed on so many fronts."

Thirteen armies, one of the greatest alliances in history, and they're losing the war. Thirteen armies, underutilized, sabotaging themselves. No matter what he does, he can't seem to make them understand that. Or if they do, it just doesn't make enough impact on them to change their behavior.

Except for the frontline. The only ones that've learned the lesson are those that've fought at the front, survived side by side at Winterfell. They know now. But if that's what it takes, by the time everyone else takes it to heart, it'll be too late.

They can't get out of their own damn way.

"Why is she here?" Royce demands early on in the meeting, jerking his chin to the dignified woman at Jon's end of the table. "We can make do with no translator. This is sensitive information." To which she merely lifts an unimpressed eyebrow.

Jon opens his mouth, but Grey Worm sternly interjects, "Missandei of Naath is head of the Queen's Council." And then, "Why are you here?" Which is all that needs to be said on the matter, everyone else ignoring Royce's indignant puffing.

Once compromises are made and new battle plans are drawn, the military commanders scatter, a few lingering behind to address private concerns or various personal requests. It's not until the last of them are gone that Missandei slips back inside, a darkened look on her face that catches his attention almost instantly, pulling him from brooding over the map. She comes to his side, not meeting his eyes as she hands over a letter scroll. Saying softly, "Lord Hand."

They'd been sending ravens and riders back and forth to all the command centers, trying to keep apprised, arranging shipments. The problem is that ravens gets lost in the winter storms and riders get dead or desert, so it's all slow going, miss and hit. Hearing from the capital has been what they've all waited for most, but Missandei's face makes him brace a hand against the table edge. Letting the letter unfurl, he spends too long staring at the scrawling ink, letting out a slow deep breath to temper his maelstrom of disappointment and relief and dread. Disappointment, for it's not what he'd hoped. Relief, for it could've been worse. Dread, for what it means.

"Tyrion says Dragonstone hasn't seen her," he tells them, his voice hoarse, quiet. Taking comfort and steeling his spine from the details Tyrion made sure to include of how Jaehaerys is faring on the island.

In his second night after the Ruin of Winterfell, he'd dreamt of Viserion landing on a Dragonstone cliff. The Night King had climbed the stone stairs winding up the bluffs and found Jaeh playing kickball in the throne room. He'd knelt before his son and laid a talon tipped finger on his cheek … and Jaeh's skin had crawled with ice. He'd dreamt he turned him into his ice prince. The last thing he remembers before jerking awake yelling was those dead blue eyes shining out at him from his son's face.

After that, he'd sent a battalion of another thousand men south to Dragonstone. The island is brimming with Unsullied and Dothraki and freedmen ready to die before anything gets near Jaehaerys Targaryen, and Rhaegal would burn anything that dared down to ash, but Jon does what it takes to keep himself focused. To hold himself back from riding south and abandoning this war and everyone in it to death.

But Daenerys…
Even if he decided to forsake them all, he wouldn't know how to get to her.

Davos puts a hand to his shoulder, squeezes in support of Jon's silent grief, and Missandei is full of stubborn hope when she suggests, "Drogon would've sought out somewhere he feels safest. Somewhere familiar. I'm sure he took her back to Meereen. Or…"

If she's not on Dragonstone with Jaeh, then Drogon took her south to his old lair. That's what he tells himself now, staring blindly at Tyrion's letter. That's what he decides. She's in the cave, in the meadow, lying beneath the waterfall, waiting for him to find her. He conjures that image up in his mind, steels it as fact, keeps it close. It's what he needs to go on and not go mad.

Dismissing them, Jon leaves the struggles of the war room behind, trying to numb himself away from the hundred emotions threatening to break him. He lets the tiredness consume him instead, because that at least he has control of. Sleep, he can do. Rest, he can manage. He works at the leather straps of his cloak, his jerkin, getting undone as much as he can on his climb up the dark stone stairs to the highest point of the tower. Ignoring the men camped in the corridor. Dothraki Queensguard that've taken up the mantle of hovering nearby ever since the Mother's Men that'd served as his Kingsguard all these years went south with Sansa and the caravan, Marselen wanting to keep his legion together.

In Winterfell, he hadn't need of protection, not in his ancestral stronghold. But out on the road, encamped with armies, in these crumbling ruins, they keep at his heels, eyes on him wherever he goes, taking up posts at his door.

He passes the pair propped on overturned crates outside his room, gambling at some kind of dice and gem game, drinking heavy. He shakes his head at them but doesn't comment, closing the door on their jeering. They're certainly not as devoted to their new role as they'd been to safeguarding their Khaleesi. Not that he blames them. He's never felt comfortable with this part of being king, holding his life above the men around him, needing to be guarded. The commands, the decisions, the control, that part of being king he's most attached to. But this shit, he can do without.

It probably makes him a lousy leader, letting them get away with it, but he's tired and he can't find it important. He'd never have let his black brothers shirk their duty like that back at the Wall, but these are different times, different situations. Besides, Dothraki have their own way. They're not knights or sworn Watch. And he didn't assign them this responsibility anyway, so why should he have to prop them to his standards?

He argues with himself about little things like this as he undresses, the hard clank of the metal gorget hitting the floor, the pile of fur cloak and leathers, wrestling with his boots, half asleep already. In the Night's Watch, he'd have never left his clothes on the floor in a mess, but folded and hooked them neatly with respect. He doesn't care. He doesn't care about a lot of things anymore. Things he'd been bred to feel important, he's come to find inconsequential to him now.

The end of the world will do that to a man, he supposes.

It's a laughable thought. What does it matter, his belongings dumped on the dirty floor? He'll pick them up and put them right back on in a few hours anyway. What's the point?

But those little thoughts lead to less inane thoughts. To dangerous thoughts.

*What's the point of any of this?*

Jon spends every day now pushing that feeling away, burying it down, forging ahead. It always surfaces.
His existence has become surreal so quickly. He's made a bed for himself at the top of the Children's Tower in the ruins of Moat Cailin. The Children's Tower, where the Children of the Forest once worked unimaginable magic to split this continent apart millennia ago, cracking this very land to stop the advancing Andals. And when they failed, they used that magic to create the Night King instead.

*What's the point of any of this?* he thinks, his last thought before the black takes him and he gets to forget for awhile, to not think, to not wonder…

It doesn't last long. There's a howling in his head, keeping him from rest. Fire in his blood, ice in his soul. The howling turns to singing. The moon is bleeding, dripping red to the snow. He runs for it, chasing it, always chasing what's in the sky, what's out of his reach. It takes him awhile to realize he's not a man. He's a wolf. He's Ghost.

The moon is bleeding and there are shadows in the silver and red moonlight, winged shadows flying the dark sky. He's chasing dragons.

And then he's not. He's inside a warm castle, laid by the hearth, on the floor under Sansa's skirts as she sits with a book. He'd been sleeping, dreaming of the hunt. But he's awake now and he's shaking off the spell of it. He'd felt it, the *push*, the call. His blood sings for it, to get up and go, to chase it down. He doesn't belong here. He's supposed to stay, supposed to guard his clawless pack, but it's not where he's needed. He belongs out there.

"Ghost?" she says, her voice confused. He's gotten up. He's leaving her. "What's wrong? What is it?"

He can't tell her. She can't understand. She's not one of them. She was once, she was touched, she was gifted, but she made her choice. She severed her connection. So he can't tell her why he must go.

He's running, paws in the snow, following the moon. Running from Riverrun, running towards the lake. The moon is calling. She's crying for him.

Urgency is slamming his heart against his ribcage, making sure he knows he needs to get up. But his head is foggy and his limbs are heavy and his eyes burn when he tries to open them up and see what's wrong.

He smells smoke, a perfumed cloying filling up his nose, making him gag. He smells spice. Cedar. Balsam. Some unpleasant tang.

Incense. He hadn't lit incense.

It's making him heavy.

"The Kingslayer sends his regards," someone whispers in his ear, and Jon just barely gets a forearm in the way. The dagger that'd come for his jugular sinks into the muscle there instead. He twists, falling off the side of the bed, latching onto the wrist attached to the dagger, refusing to let go. He slams back into the man's chest to keep them together, to keep them close, struggling to keep the blade at bay.

He's too weak, too thick, too clumsy. He can't see anything but burning shadows, the sting in his watering eyes. He can't think. The blade goes in deep at his shoulder, managing to force it sideways...
as it drives in, sideways enough to miss his chest and be a killing blow. But it hits deep and he yells out. He's on his knees. The man pulls back, lets him fall, and he drops facedown to the floor when he tries to get a grip on the hilt to yank it loose. He doesn't have the strength. It's stuck. He needs to pull harder. It hurts. When he goes to try again, a rope hooks around his throat, tugged taut, cutting off his breath, crushing his voice. He's pulled up again by the force of it, arched back against his killer, struggling to get nerveless fingers dug under the rope to offer resistance.

Choking, drugged, there's very little of it left in him.

Heart spiking with the visceral necessity of survival, Jon twists the knife out of himself to slam it behind him, hoping it catches. It does, but he doesn't know where, and it must've not been a good enough spot, because the rope stays tight. He makes the crush at his throat worse by throwing his weight into the man, feet lifting off the floor. One sole finds a beam and kicks off with all he's got, thrusting them backward as the rotted beam cracks in half and bits of roof collapse down at them. They hit the outer wall and he wrenches, managing to spin them. The man pushes his body against Jon's, keeping the rope cinched, pushing to knock him hard into the stone. Once, twice, but on the third shove, he catches a foot in the way before impact, knee bent, launching against the momentum. Flipping over him, forcing the noose apart.

They fall together, his killer landing flat on his back, Jon crashing facedown out of the half flip. The bloody dagger swipes towards him, but he's already rolling away. He clutches to the floor with hands and shins and toes, trying to scrape his way upright, trying to stop the world from spinning off sideways. Nothing's level. Nothing's right. He's on his feet but he's hunched, staggering, collapsing to a knee again as he makes his way across the room, striving toward Longclaw.

Behind him, the assassin laughs.

His hand reaches out, just shy of his sword, and the blade nicks his neck again. The man laughs, beard scratching his ear as he bends close. "They said you'd be a hard kill. I'm almost disappointed."

Jon slams his skull into his nose, scarred palm shoving under the blade as the man jerks back, protecting himself. He casts it wide, a sharp slice slinging blood across the debris filled floor. He snaps a heel into his ankle. He rolls onto his back, slamming both feet then into his chest to throw him farther. Over his head, he strains for Longclaw, just grasping the hilt when an arrow bursts through the man's neck, bringing him up short. Jon freezes in shock, watching his face go slack, blood bubbling from his mouth, and his lifeless body dropping, first to his knees, then over, eyes unseeing.

In the open doorway, the silver wildling stands, her bow still drawn and ready. Behind her, the Dothraki are strewn across the corridor, unconscious. Drugged as he's been, he'd guess. His blurred gaze goes to her nocked arrow and his fingers furl tighter around Longclaw's hilt. He'd be dead before he could unsheathe it, never mind get up off the floor and across the room to her. But she killed his killer. He spends a moment with his breath trapped in his abused throat, smoke in his nose, watching her. Waiting for her to decide.

As she lowers the bow, there might never have been a decision to make. She might've been nothing but his rescuer all along. Or the thought might've occurred. Either way, he lets it pass, letting the suspicion slip away. For now, there are greater concerns.

She hooks her bow on her shoulder and enters the room, picking carefully through the fallen roof. She picks up the incense burning on a table and rubs it out, unlatching the shutters and throwing the window open to air it out.

Voice hoarse, broken from being strangled, he rasps, "Thank you."
She only dips her chin in a terse nod of acknowledgment. Crouches to check his neck, his shoulder, his palm, and then pulls him up on his feet. Jon shrugs her gently off, using Longclaw for support, making his own way to collapse in a chair at the table. As the fresh night air slowly clears his head, cleans up his vision, he stares down at the body of his would be assassin, his words echoing, trying to recognize his strange face. He wears no armor, no sigils, no signifying identifiers. He could be anybody, from anywhere. Sent by the Kingslayer. The old one? Or a new one? Someone planning to claim the title with the death of the King in the North? The Dragon Queen's King.

The most obvious answer is Jaime Lannister of course, the only man people call Kingslayer. The man that would of course want vengeance above all else for Starks and Targaryens slitting his sister's throat at a peace treat. Who wouldn't wanna avenge that? It's not like they didn't know this would happen. But he didn't expect someone to get this close, not when the end of the world is nigh and everything is falling apart.

"I still don't know your name," he finds himself saying in the awkward quiet.

"Val," the silver wildling replies, staring at him with an unnerving look.

"How'd you know?" he demands. How was she here, at the top of the Children's Tower in the middle of the night, at the king's chambers, at just the right moment? Somebody might've heard the small crash of the roof piece from down in the camps, maybe, might've, somehow. But her? Just her? And to get here so soon?

The suspicion isn't really back, but it's an unavoidable possibility, and a question that needs answering.

"I wasn't coming to steal into your bed again, if that's what you're asking," she quips, toeing idly through the debris instead of facing him now. "I was actually thinking about … well, apologizing."

Jon frowns. "Yeah?"

"Look, I just…" Frustration colors her cheeks, an irritated sigh pushed out. "I was supposed to be a queen, you know, like you kneelers. Not just a leader. A real ruler."

"How's that?"

"Before war with the Night's Watch killed Mance," she explains, leaving the last half of that statement up for his supposition. Was she to be his wife? He doesn't remember her among the King-Beyond-The-Wall's camp. Had she just intended to seduce him the way she'd tried Jon? And now she's feeling thwarted of her ambition? She says again, "A real ruler," in a softened tone, as if she's drifted off for a second. Then she sharpens. "I should've been. I had every intention. I was promised as much. The Free Folk tribes woulda been better off still united, not fractured how we've been now, following a faraway queen and a King Crow that're too busy with their own people to truly lead us the way we need."

"So you thought fucking me would get you some power?" he retorts crassly, incredulously, earning a roll of the wildling's eyes.

"That's the way of you southerners. Don't pretend it isn't. I've seen as much."

"That's not my way."

"Oh?" she laughs, spinning to face him again. She comes back to the table, standing over him, studying him. Lighter now, her embarrassment forgotten. "Isn't that what you did with your Dragon Queen? You were a small impoverished kingdom coming up against a behemoth force. We both
know she had all the power in the world and the rest of us were left begging for scraps. So what did
King Crow do? He fucked her. Wrapped her around his finger. Look at what it's got him."

"Shut up," Jon growls, suddenly irrationally angry at the accusation.

Her blue eyes glint with humor and mockery. "Okay. But I did come to apologize. I never should've
insulted her that way, not once you were wed. Lucky for you, my guilt got me just at the right time."

"Aye, lucky for me." But he's still scowling, hunched over the table, tired and bruised and bleeding
and dazed.

Looking like she's in search of a halfhearted peace offering, Val turns to the felled assassin. Asks,
"Do you want me to get rid of the body?"

"Not yet," Jon tells her, following her gaze. He studies it for a long moment, considering once more
the circumstances. "We may have use for it. I need to speak with my sister."

The Night King is an alien creature. Once a man, but that was so long ago. He doesn't use words
anymore. He communicates with images of dreamlike meanings, impressions passed mind to mind, a
cruder form of how her dragons express themselves to their mother.

You have power inside you. I want it. Relinquish it.

That's what he means. That's the one thing she's understood clearly from all that she's soaked up
from his touch. All the rest, she can't even begin to fathom.

"I remember now," she whispers, staring up at the stone above her. She's got her medallion in her
palm, rubbing raw fingertips back and forth over the grooves of the sigil where she holds it to her
chest. She's clearheaded for the first time since Winterfell and she should be devastated. She remains
numb, accepting, strangely calm when she should be spiraling. "I don't know how I could've
forgotten. My head hasn't been whole since the fall. But I remember."

"Your Grace, I'm afraid I don't understand," Betha offers tentatively, making her blink, reminding
her the girl still sits watching over her.

If she was herself, she'd act wiser and keep her words to herself. But she's strange, in a strange
mood, in a strange state of mind, in a strange body. Voice hollow, she says, "I know I died. I know a
dagger pierced my heart. It's still there. It's inside me. I feel it. The only reason I'm still here is magic.
Competing magics really. Neither of which I even begin to understand." She swallows hard, rubbing
unconsciously at the ruined flesh. "I know I died, but I am alive. Not resurrected, just … endured. I
don't know what I am. How I am still here."

"You're tired," the girl soothes. Dismisses. "The fever made your mind funny. It'll pass, given time, I
think."

Is she right? she wonders. She could be. It would be such a relief. Is she right?

No.

She feels the truth in her bones. Part of her never forgot at all, that voice in her head warning her,
trying to make her remember. She knows.

This won't pass. This is real.
Chapter 22

Requiem For The Living

In her dream, she walks out over a vast valley of lush green. Crystal rivers crisscross the grass, shimmering blue as they flow gently over small rocks. Birds in the air sing and the sun is warm. She turns her face up to it, closes her eyes, smiles. *Is this what the Riverlands is like?* she wonders. She pulls her boots off, wanting to feel the grass beneath her bare feet. She walks for days. Days of valleys and hills, green grass and blue rivers, and always the gold sun and cool breeze. It feels like spring.

When she closes her eyes, she hears a child's laughter nearby, a boy calling for his mother in happiness. She crests the next hill and looks down into a meadow of bright wildflowers and tall grass. The boy is running away, chasing a wolf pup, his black curls disappearing in the sway of green and violet and yellow and pink. A little girl with long silver-gold hair trampling the flowers, throwing herself down with a giggle to roll through them under the sun.

She wants to do the same. She wants to drop and roll down the hill as fast as she can to get to her. To be with them and share their joy.

Before she gets there, the meadow fills up, becomes a river, sweeping them out of her reach, out of her sight. "*No!*" She dives in after them anyway, but there's nowhere to swim to. It's barely to her knees, then her hips, trying to knock her off her feet. She tries to get across to the other side, struggling through the rushing water. Bloodied water.

Halfway, it calms, easing her fight. She hesitates, catching her breath, getting her bearings. Down the river a ways, she notices a woman standing deep in the water like she is. The woman is naked, lush dark hair hanging down a tan back. When she turns at the queen's call, it's Kinvara. She smiles widely at her, enigmatically, and she smiles back. She watches the priestess cup crystal water in her hands, lifting to pour it over herself. Blue cascades over her, turning to dancing flames as it hits her skin. She still smiles, head falling back in pleasure as it skims her as the water would've, sliding over her, falling to the river.

Not just a river. *The Trident*, she realizes, as the fire spreads and the water lowers, leaving her. She bends and picks cold rubies out of the pebbles at the bottom.

A screech in the distance spins her, cranes her neck, hand over her eyes to shadow the sun. Viserion flies overhead.

The spell breaks. Her heart sinks to her stomach. Her smile dies.

Daenerys turns a slow circle, watching her world blur around her, watching it bleed from blue to red, from wet to dry, from cool warmth to blistering heat. Sickness as she clenches her fists, as she splays them, holds them up to see. Blood dripping, covered, staining the sand.

Smoke in the air, women screaming, children crying. *Lhazar*. She stands at the ridge and looks on as the massacre unfolds, Dothraki slaughtering, collecting, enslaving, raping, burning villages in their wake. For her. For her throne across the sea. When Drogo swore for her the Seven Kingdoms, she was happy. Proud. She was a stupid girl. She didn't imagine what it would take to get there. She didn't imagine this is how he'd go about it. But how could she not have imagined? She must've
known. She'd just … taken for granted. Stupid girl. Stupid selfish girl.

Trying to make amends only makes it worse. Saving the witch, saving the witch that would kill her husband, her child. That would change everything.

Everything began in Lhazar, didn't it? The first choice, the first fault, the first day she truly had blood on her hands.

Smoke in the air, men screaming, children cheering. Astapor and Yunkai burn, slaves slaughtering their masters, little Drogon alighting the parapets.

A long dusty path in the desert. Chilling silence. Children crucified on stakes looking down at her, blaming her for their horror. When she passes the last little girl, the screaming starts again. Men staked just as the children had been, masters in their noble robes, screaming in agony, screaming for help. One hundred and sixty-three men. Her Crucifixion of the Masters.

The streets of Meereen, stepping delicately between old bodies, freedmen and Unsullied slain by cowards in masks. Words written in blood on the wall, *Kill the masters, Mhysa is a master. At the end of the alley, it opens into the sky. She looks up in the distance where the Harpies stand, guilty men and all those associated with them lined at a garish gallows. Beheaded, burned. Crowds of Ghiscari standing below them, crying in grief for them. Nobles crying for their fathers and brothers and sons, freedmen crying for Mossador where Daario puts him to his knees and takes an arakh to his neck. On bitter opposite sides of an ancient drawn line, they all come together to turn on her, to cry at her, to hiss at her, accusing.

She failed them. She failed them all.

"I am a queen, not a butcher," she'd once said. But those were lies. So many lies to herself over the years. She is a butcher. She's become.

Lhazar, Qarth, Astapor, Yunkai, Meereen, Volantis, Vaes Dothrak, Qohor, Norvos, *Braavos*. Oh, Braavos. The first time she truly waged war like the men who came before her. The Stormlands, the Westerlands, the Reach, King's Landing. The world becomes a blur of them all, wronged faces wherever she turns, blood and fire. Million murdered at her doing. Men in melted armor clamor for her attention, climbing hills of corpses to get to her, to paw at her with charred hands, their burnt flesh red and black and mottled and sloughing off. The stench leaves her gagging. They reach for her, crying in agony, begging for mercy. Condemning her.

For every worshipful shout exclaiming gratefulness, for every soul saved or freed and happy, there are a hundred dead. Waiting for her in some kind of hell.

She screws her eyes shut and shoves through them all, letting them pull at her dress and hair, leaving her marked by slimed skin and ash. When the din of their voices fade into an eerie hush and their hands fall away, she opens her eyes to a battlefield. The aftermath. Smoke and mist in the dewy dawn air. Forgotten bodies left to the mud. She walks past an old woman weeping over a young soldier. She tells herself not to stop, not to look back, not to let it in. But the woman turns to her anyway.

In her wake, she cries, curses her, "*Your heart is black, princess!*"

Daenerys forces herself to keep moving forward.

The day she'd executed Mossador, she stood tall and stoic before the people, watching them reach pleading hands for her, watching them turn on her the second he was dead, hissing in scorn and
betrayal. That night, she'd closed herself alone in her chambers and sunk to her knees in tears, remembering his face. The way he'd looked to her, unguarded, desperate, hopeful, his faith in her never wavering. His disappointment palpable and heartbreaking. She'd turned away from him like a coward, couldn't hold his stare before Daario's arakh swung down, but she'd heard his soft broken, "Mhysa, please."

She heard that in her dreams for months. Sometimes, she still hears him. Him and the tens of thousands of voices he embodies.

He was under her protection and she failed him. She always fails them.

Past the battlefield is a sheer cliff. She doesn't stop walking until she reaches the very edge of it, looking down breathlessly at the impossible height, so far into the sky she can't even see the ground. But it's ice. Everything is ice around her, the cliff, the valleys and mountains in the distance. She's Beyond the Wall. Farther north than she's ever been. Behind her in the vast distance is the arrow mountain that towered over the death of her son. Ahead of her is an eternal winter.

Rivers of ice, dead plains, frozen shores, mountains of madness, and a seeming abyss of unconnected time and space. The very heart of winter. When she reaches for it, an unspeakable terror wells up in her chest, inexplicable but visceral.

Skies are white, except for the swirling pink of sunset that dances across the mountaintops. Then a shimmer of luminous green, over on the dark side, where night has begun. It glows, that green, waving through the stars like a flag in the wind. It turns the snow below it into a kaleidoscope. It turns the world breathtaking.

"Curtain of Light," someone tells her.

Before she can turn, he steps up to stand beside her at the edge, staring out, a clouded expression on a face she's only ever seen vacant. "Bran…"

"You see it, don't you? The Curtain of Light at the End of the World. So north, past the ice where nothing grows, nothing lives."

"I see it. What is it?"

"A gateway," he answers. "Not for us, but for them. The Curtain divides us from the other realm, I think. The realm of the gods."

Prophecy dreams, fever dreams, nonsense. She doesn't know what they are, if they're one, if they're all of the above. Bits of metaphorical truth and foresight woven into the unconscious confusion of her mind trying to find an outlet for festering emotion. She sees Brandon Stark on two hale legs. She sees Kinvara. She sees Quaithe. And other things. Tendrils of the flashes the Night King's touch had assailed her with. Her mind takes those hints and implications, those vague glimpses of things with no context, and it unfurls them into stories, fragmented narratives, spinning dream tales around them to give them some sort of sense.

No matter the story, every time she turns, there's a flash of a burned face written onto her eyelids. Another tortured soul, another victim. Enemies, even her enemies are her victims, waiting for her in the afterlife.

_I am hellbound_, she thinks. And amidst the disorienting barrage, that is the one thing that feels true and solid and unmistakably earned.
But she also feels acceptance of that, not regret. At least not a regret heavy enough to wish she'd done it all differently, or not done any of it at all. When she sees the dead, she pulls her people closer to her heart, brings up their faces instead.

She takes herself back to Yunkai, back to the emaciated slaves in brown rags spilling out hesitantly from the city walls, surrounding her, their hands outstretched, calling for her in gratitude and awe. The beaming children and the relieved tears of their parents that spoke of lives of such unimaginable despair. They hadn't bowed down, had they? No, that would've been awful. They didn't bow. They were never on their knees before her. They lifted her up. Above them, yes, it's true, but also with them, in the midst of them, touching them, a part of them. Welcomed. All those outstretched hands, dirty and broken and rough, reaching for her, grazing her, wanting a little piece of the fantastical figure that had freed them. And she welcomed those hands, the feel of them scraping at her, stroking, creating an unbreakable connection.

The happiness she felt that day, the profound belonging, there'd been nothing like it in her heart, not all her life, not until that day.

What she'd done for them… In her, it was a revelation.

*Revolution* is what she was born for. It's the only reason she exists.

She takes herself back to Dragonstone. She remembers the peace on the faces of the freedmen, their easy laughter, their contented work, the singing she could hear at night sometimes even over the roar of the ocean. How effortlessly they love and are loved, how openly they share, how they're the ones that made the cold dark ominous tower of Dragonstone into a home.

Some she has conquered, yes, but some she has rescued. Those that needed subjugating, like the masters, like the Dothraki men, like the Westeros Houses, those that would subjugate others in worse ways, and those that needed set free...

For them, for Unsullied, for freedmen, for Dothraki, for Free Cities commoners, for Westerosi smallfolk, for all those that had been suffering before she fought her fights and now have gained a sliver of hope or freedom or justice. For all of them, she will resign to the hell of her making and surrender to those she's wronged and those she's punished and those she's failed when her time ends.

But her time is not yet ended. She has so many more fights to face.

"Hinges of the world, they are called," a disembodied voice tells her as she walks across a bridge made of shiny black glass, lost in a world of stars. Obsidian under her feet. Dragonglass. "The Curtain in the north, the Shadow in the east, powerful places at their own very edge of the world. Ancient places. Timeless."

"The Shadow," Daenerys says, walking still. The end of the bridge is looming near and past it is only black and a blur of stars. If she keeps walking, she'll walk off the end and fall into nothingness. "Do you mean the Shadowlands beyond Asshai?"

"Where your dragon eggs came to you from, princess. You remember."

"I do."

"Below the Mountains of the Morn, where the Shadow Men dwell, and farther still, where no man dwells. The Heart of Flame and Shadow."
"The seat of R'hllor, upriver from Asshai," she says, recalling Kinvara's lessons. Something about a corpse city? She isn't sure. Asshai and its regions are so shrouded in mystery and legend, so many contradicting stories, like the ruined peninsula of Lost Valyria and its lingering Doom. Nothing is really known.

"Yes, yes, princess, yes. And what of the other seat?"

"What? I don't know."

"The Heart of Winter."

"You mean the Curtain?"

"Below it."

"I don't know."

"You know. You do, you know. The seat of the Great Other, beyond the arrow mountain in the northernmost Lands of Always Winter."

"What? What is it? I don't know."

As she says it, the black brightens. Stars swirl together to create a shine of white, a wintry landscape. She stands on the glass bridge and looks out over the endless cold. The Curtain flickering in the sky, green brilliance calling to her. But below it, on the ground beneath it, lies a terrible abyss. The terror she'd felt the last time she'd reached out that direction swells in her once more, but she knows where it comes from now. Not the Curtain, but the ice beneath it. A sharp formation of ice, a mountain made of it purely, ringed like a crown under the green, topped by deadly icicles like spires.

It belongs to him, the other side of Fire's coin. R'hllor's enemy. Winter's altar.

This is where the Night King was reborn. Not created, she knows, somehow she knows. Just as she was born on Dragonstone, he was created in the south, and yet they were both born into their fullest potentials, their truest forms, somewhere else. This is his final birthplace. Just as she was reborn on the Great Grass Sea in fire, at the edge of the Red Waste, he was broken free of his chains here in the ice, in the Heart of Winter, his original purpose frozen away and a new existence embedded. A new darkness, his first magic granted from the Old Gods corrupted by an outside force, an overpowering influence. The Great Other.

Her vision darkens. Heat singes the tips of her hair. The bridge stretches out over nothing but shadow now. Not black, not true black, no stars. Just shadow, cast down by the firelight in the distance. It's suffocating, this shadow. And just as silent as the ice had been, just as unnerving. It's a land of small mountains, covered in dry gold brush, ripe for cindering. Almost barren, not like a desert and its impressive adaptability, but like a land once lush that's been scoured and left to die of thirst.

As the green light in the north had shimmered through the sky with some epic alien majesty, whorls of smoke obscure the stars. A curtain of smoke, a blanket more than a gateway. She can't imagine what the other side of it is like. She doesn't want to imagine, doesn't want to ever find out.

"Hinges, princess, hinges," that voice echoes.

Frustration cuts finally through her numb vague mood, clearing her head of its pacifying cobwebs.
"Why tell me this? Why does it matter? Why must I know?"

"Suppose it doesn’t."

She turns this time towards the sound and finds a hunched crone waiting for her. Past the edge of the bridge that had been nothingness, now a narrow river, and a rocking rowboat waiting for her to step on. When she takes the crone’s offered hand, she looks into her withered face and recognizes the woman from the battlefield. The one who'd called her a darkheart.

The river has a placid black surface, dusted in burnt cinders that drift from the sky to coat it. As the crone rows, Daenerys skims a careful hand across the water, clearing ash enough to see her face reflected in the black shine. In her reflection, her mortal blue eyes glow orange with flame.

"Ash," she whispers thoughtfully. "That's what it's called, isn't it? This river that runs from Asshai up to the Morn Mountains. Ash River."

The crone says nothing, just rows on, and Daenerys watches the Shadowlands pass her by. A narrow cleft in the mountain, river snaking through, pitching them into absolute darkness, a crack of faint light following them too high up where the mountain parts to make a difference. Crevices pockmark either cliff, caverns dug deep. At the mouths of them, she glimpses inky shadow demons and baby dragons, lingering, pacing, watching her pass. Itching to lick out at her. She feels their unnatural eyes like sticky fingers on her skin. And then dead things.

Corpses. So many corpses. Twisted and deformed, decayed, hideous things lurking in shadow, sickened beasts. She remembers then, what they say, what they warn of Asshai and beyond. No animal survives breathing their air, walking their soil, eating their food. Rot fills her nose. Choking on it, she challenges, "The Lord of Light is meant to be a god of life. Why so much death at his heart?"

"Corruption, princess. Poisoned power. There're reasons he's waned on us these last millennia. There're reasons he's losing the eternal struggle."

She doesn't know if she believes that. She doesn't know if she believes in him. All she knows is his enemy is very real, god or man or magic, whatever name is put to it. The Night King and his ice creatures, her dragons and her immunity to the fire, that's all she knows for sure. That's all she believes in. The rest… She takes it with a grain of salt. But she does take it. Learning more, collecting as many answers as possible, that has never hurt.

"Fall of Asshai, Doom of Valyria, the Long Night… He's taken a beating."

They leave the cleft and open into a canal cutting through a city. A city made of basalt, a city of people encased in stone and ash. She hadn't imagined what that meant, city of corpses, but now she sees. Bodies frozen in place as if they died in an instant, between one breath and the next. Some standing, some seated, merchants and buyers between a market stall, children in the middle of play, some holding each other in a lover's embrace. A city of corpses, but they look like a lovely macabre tableau of carved statues.

When she extends an arm past the boat and touches the rough grey rock of a leaning tower, an oily residue is left on her hand, a feeling of wrongness. She pitches it into the water to wash it off, but it only leaves her coated in oil and ash. The crone tsk unhelpfully as she glances her way for advice.

"This is the place only shadowbinders are bold enough to venture?"

She shrugs. "Not many go. Fewer return."
With the city in their wake now, the crone rows deeper into the darkness, higher up the river, until looming above them is another mountain. This one is unlike the others. This one is unlike any mountain she's ever seen before. From so near, she realizes it's not smoke that blankets the sky above the Shadowlands like the northern lights. It's a plume of ash. Rising from the cracked peak of the mountain. Like bright molten veins running down through it, the mountain is alight with lava. It spills forth from the vent at the top and surrounds the mountain with a dark lake on land.

Ash River takes her beyond the corpse city of Stygai, into the Heart of Flame and Shadow itself. A volcano.

"This is his seat on our earth? Your god?"

"Your god," the crone corrects with an odd grin. "Not mine."

Distracted, Daenerys doesn't look away from the volatile mountain towering over them, neck craned, fingers grasped painfully at the edge of the boat. "That's why the land feels heated from beneath? And why it never sees sun? The ash settled in the air must block it out."

"Volcanic winter, they call it. The men of science, not magic, mind you. We know what men of magic call it."

"Which of them is right?" she wonders. After all, every story, every myth, every magic might have an explanation in nature. No need for gods or sorcerers to make sense of natural occurrences.

"Both probably."

"What does it matter now?"

"What did it matter then?" she counters, unconcerned.

A flicker of anger. "Why am I here?"

"Isn't that the question?" the crone crows, laughing at her frustration.

"I didn't need to see this. It doesn't help me."

"Doesn't it?"

"No," she says, but makes it a question on her face. "What good is knowing this is here, his seat of power, when it gives me nothing? I need to know how to stop the enemy. I need to know how to stop winter itself."

"Gives you nothing! How arrogant! How stupid! It's given you everything, you silly spoiled princess."

Daenerys cocks a cool eyebrow. Parrots, "Spoiled."

"Here is where you come from," the crone snarls. "Not Valyria. That bastard child of Great Asshai. Here is where your power was born and all that comes with it. He gave you a gift and you squander it."

"I squander nothing," she snaps, suddenly straightening tall, stiff, hot. "And I am a queen, old woman, not a princess."

Which earns her another mocking laugh. "Are you? Dragon Queen. Hah. You don't even know what you are." She leans forward, tapping rudely at her scarred chest. "That's why that's in there,
isn't it? You don't know and you turned your back on him when you should've been embracing him with everything you had. How's he supposed to save you when you don't accept him? When you don't ask! It's his magic you're using, you know. Walking through fires, waking dragons out of stone, tethering your very soul to those godly beasts. Why don't you get on your damn knees, stupid girl, and pray for his help? Maybe then he'll save you."

"Will he?"

"Who knows?" She shrugs again and Daenerys wants to strike her. "His will is a mystery. Maybe you must save yourself."

"Then what exactly are you lecturing me for?" she chides.

"You irritate me."

"I'm not very fond of you either. Who are you?"

"None of your business. Princess."

She huffs, pushing out her hostility with the breath, summoning patience. She says, "The Lord of Light. Can he help me? With this?" Fingers to her chest, to the twist of black scar tissue. "Could I just … take it out?"

The crone laughs, not kindly. "You got stabbed in the heart, stupid. That glass is the only thing keeping you alive now. But sure, take it out."

"I don't feel alive," she murmurs.

"That's your fault. Fix it yourself."

"Can he protect me from whatever the Night King wants?"

"Gotta do that yourself too. But you've his magic in you already, don't you? So he's already done his half. So what's stopping you?"

"I don't know."

"You don't know anything, do you? This is why I hate children. I can't believe this is what it's come to, the fate of this struggle, in the hands of children."

"I've had enough of you," Daenerys warns, and the crone laughs. She stabs an oar into the basalt coast and tips the boat, sending the queen crashing into the water with a yelped, "Wait!"

Black. Black water, ash in her lungs, she thrashes, trying to find the surface. It's not there anymore. She sinks deeper, a cold claw wrapped around her ankle, dragging her slowly down. And down and down and down.

In the drowning silence, there's a new voice. The dragons know…

+ A Shroud of Smoke and a Curtain of Light. Heart of Shadow, Heart of Winter. A volcano at one end of the world, a glacier at the other. Magical opposites.

She has no idea how that helps her.
"I told you," someone says, spinning her away from the sunset she found herself staring into, spinning around to face the High Priestess. They're on the veranda in the Great Pyramid, royal chambers in the open archway behind them, a baby mewling in his bassinet, candles burning. The world is bright pink and blue and yellow as the sun descends towards the desert sand in the distance, glittering the rivers of Meereen. Kinvara reminds her, "My queen, you are more than blessed."

"I should've listened," she admits. If she'd explored this side of her earlier, perhaps she could've found a way to avoid the dragonglass. Perhaps she could've avoided much of what's come to pass.

With a serene smile, head tilted at her, the priestess stands close at her side, tells her, "You are a vessel of R'hllor, as surely as the Night King has become a vessel of the Great Other. You know this. You've felt it yourself when he touched you."

"Was it me?" she asks, voice dropped to an almost whisper as she looks out over the skyline. "Did my waking the dragons from their stone wake him as well? Is all this my doing? Is it my fault?"

"No, my queen. His power has been restoring for centuries, building, preparing. You woke yourself in the flame because your time had come. Because the world had need of you."

"I doubt that. It didn't need me. I've made things worse."

"To go north, you must journey south," the Red woman begins, abruptly cryptic, but it's not her own voice leaving her lips. It's someone else's. "To reach the west, you must go east."

"What?"

"To go forward, you must go back." Kinvara's face blurs into a swirl of stars. The queen stumbles back in surprise, watching her morph into a blinding solar flare until it dims and another woman is standing in her place. A gangly woman in a flat gemstone dress, shaved head, and a mask that cages her whole head, all the way down her throat. The mask is made of spade shaped starlight and gold chain. She declares, "To touch the light, you must pass beneath the shadow…"

"Who are you?"

"Quaithe by the Shadow, Stormborn."

"I know that name. Jorah spoke of it. You helped me in Qarth."

"I tried."

"What did you mean before?"

"As I said." Then the woman advances on her and Daenerys can't help backpedaling to keep her distance. Spiders are crawling up her spine. She's not sure what it is, but she doesn't want her any closer. "The glass candles are burning, Stormborn. I'll be gone soon. You must listen."

"Glass candles? I've seen Kinvara use those tools to talk to her brethren across vast distances. Is that how you're here?" Shock reverberates through her. She sharpens at the implication. Accuses, "Are you real? Are you invading my head?"

"Your dreams are unusually tangible. Your power makes you bright. A lighthouse across the sea, a flare of dying stars in the night, easy to find."

"You're a shadowbinder. You're from Asshai, like Kinvara."
"I'm not like that one."

"No?"

"When the raven calls, follow its flight. It sees more from the sky than you may on the ground. It will show you the way home."

"I'm not lost. I know where home is. What I need are solutions. Weapons."

"You possess every weapon you need. Remember who you are, Daenerys Stormborn. The dragons know. They've always known."

"You mean Drogon and Rhaegal? Or Jon and I?"

"The dragons."

"I heard you, but—"

"Lightbringer must be protected," the shadowbinder insists, and she understands suddenly what she's saying. Kinvara called her black son that. **Lightbringer**. Azor Ahai's ultimate weapon.

Just as she thinks of him, he appears, swooping out of the clouds, finding himself a perch to rest on, one of the smaller pyramids across the city. She watches him sprawl, his talons digging into stone to crumble dust down on people in the streets, his tail coiling around the corner. She smiles, feeling solace in her chest at his nearness, feeling vague relief. And then she's filled with a quiet certainty, one that settles into her bones like it's been there always. It fits. It belongs.

Drogon knows. Drogon has always known. Drogon is the Lightbringer.

"He's touched by the Red god too, isn't he?" she asks, staring down at her son. Confused by the snarl of dread in her stomach muddling up the relief. It makes sense. How he sensed Jon across the world, knew to bring her to him when he didn't know who to trust her with. How he sensed Jon in trouble, brought her to Castle Black just before he would've died. He has no tether to Jon, no magic link connecting their minds, their thoughts, their emotions, like he has with her. And yet… He knew. He always knew. Is that a god's influence? Is that Fire's magic?

"They are Stormborn's children. Stormborn's of R'hllor's children. It would follow," Quaithe answers.

"How do I protect him then? If he's my weapon?"

"One of many weapons. And that is not a puzzle for me to solve."

**Helpful**, the queen thinks, biting back her annoyance. "Why have you come to me now? What do you want?"

"Daenerys Stormborn stands at the final precipice. I felt your light flare. I feel your struggle. The glass in your heart, the fire in your veins. There is a crossroads before you, one way, or the other. An easy path down to darkness and absolute power. Or a path of pain and strife toward life and restoring balance. Balance requires continuing the eternal struggle, no end, no victory."

"No," she resists, head shaking. "No, no, that's not the choice. Defeat or victory, that's what we've been fighting for. To kill the Night King. To **end this** once and for all. We can do that. We can. I just need…"
What? What? She's losing grip on the thought, on the certainty, on the faith she needs to forge forward. The shadowbinder can't be right. This can't all just be to mire them in a never-ending war. That's not what she's fighting for. That's not what they've sacrificed so much for.

"Don't trust the dark flame," Quaithe warns her. And then she's gone.

Quaithe by the Shadow, the Red High Priestess, the Three-Eyed Raven. These are the souls she keeps coming back to, those she circles, those three out of the countless faces in her dreams during the time she's trapped. Trapped in a dream, trapped in a fever, trapped in a curse. Bedridden, healing, fighting off the spell of the dragonglass. An unholy trinity, a hybrid of magics, from the Old Gods, from the new. Children's magic, Ice's magic, Fire's magic. Mixing in her blood, her heart, her soul.

Eventually, all the incoherent fragments coalesce into knowledge. Surety.

She looks into the darkness behind her, she looks into the light ahead of her, and she comes slowly to an inexplicable clarity. She grasps otherworldly wisdom in her hand, and as solid as it seems, she has to wonder whether she's just accepting the swell of madness that overtakes her. Is she delusional and fervent like a Red zealot? Is that why she feels a sudden calm? Is that why she's convinced she's the heir of a fire god?

A demigoddess?

A madwoman with delusions of grandeur?

She'd been so afraid of this. All her life, she'd been afraid.

To become her brother, to become her father.

Eventually, walking through the maze of her mind becomes less like the spell she'd fallen under in the House of the Undying in Qarth and more like… It feels logical. Purposeful. Insightful. Sensible. Perhaps that's the strongest mark of her insanity. Where the illogical becomes logical. Where the disorienting becomes comfortable.

If she's not mad, then there's something important she needs to remember, something she must take with her out of her dreams into the waking world.

The Others evolved from their original creators, the Children, by being woken by the Great Other in the ice. Just as she was saved by the Lord of Light in the fire. As servants of the darkness, they must spread from end to end, until all light is consumed, all life is hollowed. But first comes selfish needs. They're driven by their vengeance. She knows that, not because she was told by some vision of an ally, but because she felt that. She felt it when he touched her, felt it in the flashes that flooded her as the dragonglass slid in, the closest passion to his heart, the most intense desire driving him, the one thing he intended to conceal from her. To eradicate the last of their original creators, the last remnants of the Old Gods and their dying power.

He's going to the river. He's going to the lake. He's going to the isle.

Wolves howling. That's what pulls her out of the fire.

She leaves it behind, leaves it burning bright in the dark night, ash on the bottom of her feet, footprints grey in the snow. She follows the moon hanging full in the starry sky, follows the sound of
the howls. Direwolves were descendents of the North, cousins to the Children of the Forest. Arya once said the Stark siblings were given their wolves as gifts from the Old Gods, knowing they'd need them in the journey to come. She likes the thought of that, the comfort of it, wants to hold them close. She trusts the wolves. Instinct, foolishness maybe, but undeniable instinct, drawing her to their howls.

Hoping she finds them. Hoping she finds their soulmates.

All she gets is the raven.

"How are you here?" she wants to know, turning to Bran beside her in the moonlit field of snow.

"I'm not."

"Is that meant to be a joke, little brother?"

"Little brother," he repeats, growing distracted, soft. "Nobody's called me that since I was just a boy."

"You're still a boy," she murmurs, grieving the world that would make him think otherwise.

"I have missed you, Daenerys. You and Jon and… I have missed you." His faint half smile is sad, filled with longing and surprise, as if he hadn't known it was so until the moment he said it.

Which is what confuses her the most out of all this. She and Brandon Stark hardly know each other. They've shared less than three intimate conversations together. Yet he looks at her as a long lost friend. "Are you using a shadowbinder's glass candle to visit me? Or is this a gift of the Three-Eyed Raven?"

"You're a bright flare. Makes you easy to find. Someone told you that once."

"Only in a dream."

"I see dreams," he quips, that half smile now amused. "Your dreams anyway. They're not like other people's dreams, are they?"

"You seem different, Bran."

Eerie once more, "Do I? But how would you know? You've never met me."

"Of course I've met you."

"The Three-Eyed Raven. That's who you know. The Bran you know, right now, he's not who I am."

"Then who are you, if you're not him?"

"I told you, I'm not here."

"That doesn't answer my question."

"The North remembers," he says, and she sees flashes across her eyes of white bark and red leaf. Weathered skin, green like moss. Long fingers on old hands, long and gnarled like knotted tree roots.

"Weirwoods?" she surmises, deciphering what he's telling her in his odd way.
"And their Green Men."

"Green Men?"

"Their priests."

"Why do trees need priests?"

"The weirwoods are the Old Gods," he elaborates, "where all memory goes when the Children die. The singers with their songs of spells, prayers, history."

"Singers?"

"That's what they called themselves, before they were all gone, before the Night King killed the last of them. First Men named them Children of the Forest, but they called themselves Those Who Sing the Song of Earth."

Which is when she begins to figure it out. Looking into his dark Stark eyes, the way his face moves with life, completely different from the muted boy in his wheeled chair she left back in Winterfell. "You're not Bran at all, are you? You're wearing his face to get me to trust you, but you're something else."

"A little bit."

"A little bit?" she echoes incredulously. "What does that mean?"

"It means you're right," he says with a mischief grin, "and you're wrong."

"Who are you?" she snaps.

"Bran Stark, I promise, good sister. I am Bran, and I am other things, altogether. You could think of me, if you like, as an amalgamation."

"I don't like."

He spreads his hands out, a sarcastic helpless gesture, and there is nothing of Bran Stark in that. It leaves her unnerved, suspicious, a paranoid protective hostility surging up. Is Jon's little brother in trouble, out there somewhere? Has he been taken over somehow? Afflicted in some way? But no, none of that feels like the right answer. He searches her face for a long moment, taking a step back through the snow as she steps forward, advancing on him, not quite yet threatening.

Soothingly, he says, "I am Summer, Bran Stark's fallen direwolf. I am the trees, I am the ravens, I am the rocks. I am the man that would be the Three-Eyed Raven before Bran Stark, and the man before him, and the man before him. I am every greenseer that has gone to the roots."

"You're some kind of forest spirit?" she wonders, not fully assuaged.

"If you like," he says again, easiness about him that doesn't belong to Bran. Then he waves off her upset, continuing as if she'd never interrupted to interrogate him. "The singers had gold eyes like the sun. Rarely, there were a few, the chosen ones, born green like moss or red like blood, marked by the gods."

"Marked for what?"

"For the gifts."
Red like blood, and in her mind she sees Ghost, his white fur, his unnaturally crimson shining eyes. That's what this Not Solely Bran is telling her, expecting her to connect disparate pieces together somehow. She has no idea why.

Over the hill, wolves howl.

"The North remembers," he says again.

The weirwoods are the Old Gods, all of history, all that power born out into the world, come back again in death. That's what he means. She understands now. Jon had explained his family's religion to her, their way of life, but not in those words, not anything like what she's been learning.

"The singers carved eyes into heart trees for the greenseers to see from, and I'm still learning, the me you know, so I need them. When I get better at this, I'll be able to see from more than just the trees. The rocks, the rivers, the earth itself will talk to me, as it did them."

"The you I know."

"The me you know."

"Not this you."

"Not this me."

"I'm tired, Bran," she sighs, giving up, letting the weight on her shoulders sink her down to sit in the snow on the hillside. "I'm so tired. Please just tell me the truth."

"All I've said is true."

"Please," she implores.

He frowns down at her in the moonlight for a long time, searching her face again, searing into her eyes as she refuses to waver them. Then he sighs too. He turns and sits down beside her, folding his legs. "It's your own mind that gets in your way, you know. It can only assimilate so much. It wasn't meant for so many magics. But a lot of very old powers are sticking their fingers in your brain and pulling out the pieces they like. You are a conduit, and conduits are rare these days, so it is inevitable you would draw all their attention. Perhaps if you'd merely lived, your fire god whispering in your ear on occasion, you'd have been overlooked. But you built yourself into a beacon. Now they come for you. Fingers in your soul, I see them, tugging at you, different directions. You'll find your way. Or you won't, then it won't matter what you know."

"Thanks," she drawls, completely insincere.

"I'll stay," he offers, compromising. "I'll stay. We'll talk."

"In more circles?"

"I'll try."

"Thank you," she says, honestly this time.

And he does try. He stays sitting with her on the hillside all night, shivering in the imaginary cold, wolves singing to the moon behind them. Not Solely Bran tells her of the Old Gods and their Children. He tells her the Night King was created in what's now the Riverlands, on the Isle of Faces, amid a sacred grove of weirwoods, amid the lake named the Gods Eye. He tells her that is where the
Night King must go to break the last remnants of his chains and seize his revenge. He tells her the living will try to keep him at bay and block his way but they will fail and they will die. And when she asks how he knows this, how he could possibly know this when the Three-Eyed Raven can't see futures, only present and past, he says, "Yes. Only past."

"Darkness swallows the dawn. Death is coming for us all."

When she spins around, it's Quaithe speaking, her starlight mask hiding everything but her amber eyes. By the Shadow, a shadowbinder from Asshai. I suppose she would know, Daenerys thinks wryly.

They do this to her. They leave her whimsical and unhinged. Bran bewilders her. Quaithe weaves words of Asshai and its tales. Riddles and warnings. Kinvara praises all that she's accomplished so far, heralds all that she's still capable of cultivating, coaxes her to bow down and pray and trust in the will of R'hllor, their lord, their one true god. She waxes over all the untapped magic locked in her skin.

And the old crone... Well, she'll be glad to never see her again.

Daenerys is swimming a molten river, fighting upstream, and all she wants is out, back on dry land, back in a world that makes sense. She wants them to leave her alone. She wants this glass in her heart and this spell writhing in her blood to just stop. To end. To surrender. Because she won't. She'll fight it, always, eternally, so it might as well just give up. It's not going to take her.

Was Azor Ahai a good thing?

She wonders that, worries about it, laughing humorlessly at the ironic question. The mythical hero, the one the whole world waits to come again and fix everything. He came from Asshai, where the darkness never abates, where the stone is greasy to the touch as it drinks in all the light. Before Azor Ahai fought the darkness, Asshai may well have been a glorious place. Now it is remnants, an almost mirror to the Valyrian wasteland. And the inevitable conclusion of that is...

What will Westeros look like, if Azor Ahai should return?

When the hero conquers the Long Night, will there be dawn? Or will Westeros become another Valyria, another Asshai? After all, the glorious Valyria was merely a bastard child itself. It was the shadows of Asshai that came before, before Valyria's gleam was its own, and before Valyria's mysterious Doom was its own.

Asshai was the true mother of dragons.

Her heart takes the dragonglass sliver and it changes her, but not the way it changed the Night King. His magic is death and ice. Hers is fire and life. She doesn't succumb. He tried to turn her, as he was turned, thinking she could be his queen. His slave. Give him more power. Help him touch the world. But if not that, he thinks she can save him. Undo the spell of the Children and free him of his undying death. Not to end his misery, but bring him to life again.

The kind of sacrifice that would require in return, the death for that life, it must be unimaginable.
She waits for the bleeding between her thighs, the cramping, the dead tissue that should fall. But it never does. She strokes a hand over her belly and breathes in, breathes out, accepts the relief and the fear in equal measure. She hadn't been sure, but she'd been suspecting for months. It could've been the stress that kept her moon blood from coming, could've been Viserion's rot causing the nausea, could've been anything else to explain her symptoms. But there was little doubt left by the time she found herself stranded at Widow's Watch.

There is a twinge of regret, but overwhelming that is the relief that she hadn't shared her suspicions yet with Jon. That's the last thought he needs haunting his mind while they're apart. While he's…

_He's alive. He's whole. He's fine. He's taking care of our people._

Beyond her grief and dread and preoccupation, she must confront the increasingly impossible to deny reality that presents itself to her now. Another impossible creation quickening her womb. Another miracle baby. Again at the worst possible time. Again persevering despite all odds.

Half her terror at the dragonglass in her heart and what it might mean had been and remains what it could do to the child inside her. Not just kill it, but poison it, corrupt it somehow. Will she birth some frozen monster? Will she bear a dark dead thing? An ice prince?

It's weeks before Yandel cuts the cast off her and tells her to exercise. Very carefully lifting her knee to rotate her hip, very slowly working the damaged muscles and joints, trying not to strain the bone's knit. Then he breaks the splint into a shorter piece and ties it tight at her pelvis, giving her a little more range. It's three months before she can even attempt to stand, and by then her body has hard fought off atrophy and the abuse of disuse. Every bit of weight bearing down on her leg, every step she hobbles to take is excruciating, but it is progress. Hope salves her impatience and frustration.

Her ever growing belly is impossible to hide, so much so that it's likely she's running out of time in more ways than one. She has to be healed before the baby is ready to come. If she's not healed well enough at that point, labor could do a lot more than break her wound apart again. It could very well kill her.

The farthest she makes it one day is down to the half demolished courtyard, relying on a crutch, held tight to Cayn's concerned side. It's been so long since she's seen her son with her own eyes, been able to reach out and touch him with her own hand, not just driven crazy in bed as he seethes and rages and worries at the other end of the tether in their minds. She's felt his pain beside her own all along, his impatience, restlessness, resentment, and that buried panic.

She wonders if he's felt her struggle, experienced the sway of the dragonglass spell as it's tried to take her under, as the Night King's magic called, and as the fire in her veins fought it off like a fever burning out a sickness. Did it call to him too? Through her, did it try to pull him under? If she'd been in her right mind all that time, not stuck in her dreams and incoherent consciousness, she might've shut him out just in case, cut their tether somehow to protect him.

Thankfully she hadn't, because the consequences of that terrify her. Would she not have been able to reestablish the connection? Would she have lost him for good? Would that have left him vulnerable to the Night King's influence the next time they came close to each other? It's better not to think of.

Paranoia of another kind flares up as she joins him. She'd worked so hard to bury it, ignore it, tell herself fiercely that things out there in the world were fine. Her family is fine. They're holding on. But leaning against Drogon's curled neck, she gives into the weak desperation. She lays her hands flat on his hide, leans her brow to him, presses her nose to him. Feeling his warmth thrum through her in that way she'd ferociously missed, stuck up in that bedroom with ice trying to eat her. She closes her eyes and pulls him close through their tether, closer than
she's ever pulled him before, until he completely envelopes her and she feels more dragon than
woman. She suspects if she opened her eyes, Cayn would see animal gold there instead of blue.
She'd never allowed him this much before, always fearful he'd overtake her, worried she'd lose
control. But now she lets him fill every empty space.

She reaches for that second strand, passing Drogon's thicker rope, ignoring Viserion's reeking rot of
wrongness, and grasping the thinner shimmery green of her bond to Rhaegal. The fainter thing, paler
thing. She wraps both hands around it and pulls at it with all her might, holding it to her heart. The
connection to all her children. It weakens her, taking too much energy when she already has feeble
amount, straining too much on her already battered mind and body. She feels what Rhaegal is feeling
from a great distance, in a way she was never capable of before. Forcing it exhausts her, but she
needs to know he's okay. They're okay, her sons on Dragonstone, Rhaegal and Jaehaerys.

Impatience, longing, boredom, fear, happiness. They play. They miss their family, but they play.
They have each other.

Daenerys smooths a hand over her swollen stomach, listening to Drogon rumble in contentment,
finally reunited.

Her black son has become the size of a mountain. Looking at him now, she can hardly fathom when
he used to perch on her shoulder, winding his tail around her throat. His mouth alone could fit five of
her, his wing a hundred. He's magnificent. No other creature like him walks this earth.

If she'd had a stronger bond with her smaller two. If she hadn't neglected them in favor of focusing
so much more energy and attention on Drogon. If she'd been focused on them as they circled the sky
Beyond the Wall, rather than let Drogon's overpowering presence in her mind drown out his
brothers. If she hadn't been so distracted by Jon…

It comes down to this. Always.

If she'd been a better mother, Viserion would live.

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In her dream, she enters the throne room in a daze, moving slowly, inexorably. Like every dream
she's had of the Red Keep, she sees it dark, charred, blanketed in snow. Holes in the roof show a
grey sky, flakes drifting through, dusting her. The long walk to the dais takes time, her body wanting
to stop, turn, go back. The room is empty, long abandoned, but still powerful.

Beside the imposing Iron Throne, a wolf sits, waiting for her. It's always here, this wolf, ever since
the first dream, ever since she was just a girl. But now it's not some eerie animal meant to represent
something she can't understand. Now she knows him. Ghost. He's familiar, he's real, and he's
drawing her upwards. Watching her with those red eyes. Every dream, she would climb the steps,
pulled dutifully to the throne, but when her hand would reach out, it would go inexplicably for the
wolf. Now she understands. The throne, it's meaningless. The wolf is what matters.

The difference tonight, for the very first time, the throne is full.

Head down, shoulders corded, he digs Longclaw into the snow at his feet, leant over it like he's too
weak to straighten himself. Beside him, Ghost whines. He doesn't look to the wolf. He doesn't move.
He doesn't even acknowledge her.

"Jon," she calls softly, too softly, breathless with dread. Reaches out. Runs her hand across his
temple, fingers stroking his curls back. Lifting his head. When he looks up at her, his eyes are blue.
She staggers back, ripping away from him. Chokes, "No."

Daenerys wakes with a strangled cry. Wrenched up in bed, panting, sweat slick. Viscerally petrified. It puts her on her feet, this last dream. There's no going back from it. She can't wait at Widow's Watch for someone to find her. She can't wait for the baby to come, for her bones to finish healing. She can't wait for Drogon's wing, if it even ever flies again. She can't afford to wait.

"He needs me," she swears, fierce, unmoving. Whirling on them when they try to talk her out of her resolve, when they quell her, soothe her, reason with her. They'll never survive out there, they say, in that weather without shelter, the trek too long, too hard, too treacherous. She denies them, pleading for them to help her. She'll walk if she has to. But she must go.

Once she walked her khalasar across the Red Waste. She can endure winter.

Lady Flint is a wraith, wasting away. Daenerys has no time to be tender with her. No time for compassion. In the dead of night, while the rest of the keep sleeps, she shut the door behind her and rips the drapes open, letting in the moonlight. Then she turns and clasps her hands in front of her, regarding the body huddled in the bed. Sunken, thin, pale, greasy hair, the unmistakable stench of neglect. She's awake, but she doesn't move, only staring vacantly towards the queen's shadow.

When she looks at her, she feels pity. Worry. Disgust. She holds onto that one to bolster herself, steel herself as she falters, the one she'd normally bury. She left the crutch at the door, so the pain of crossing to the bed creases her face, the limp of each step so severe. She sits at the edge, studying the older woman, looking for a sign of life. But there's nothing.

She understands the impulse, but she can't afford it. And she can't afford to indulge it here.

"Your daughter," she begins, "Betha, she's a good heart. You must be proud." She pauses, waits, but the woman doesn't blink. "You must love her." Her tone hardens. "She's been a help to me that I do not take for granted. She has been indispensable. She deserves a bright future. One she will not find here with you, waiting for the winter to take her. If she doesn't starve first."

Lady Flint flickers then. Her vacant eyes slide from the shadows on the floor up to Daenerys's face. What she sees, what she thinks, it's a mystery.

"I understand the pain of losing your children. I understand wanting to lay down and never get up again. To make the world go away, or at least let it pass you by. But you have a child left, breathing and beautiful, and she needs you." Another flicker, just barely. "She will not leave this place without you. Not while you still live, if that's what this can be called." And then, Daenerys tells her, "I owe your daughter. I will not leave her behind. I will keep her with me. So you must decide, here, tonight. You must make that choice you've been straddling."

Finally, the woman whispers, "Choice?"

Daenerys almost falters again, almost weakens and shies back from her resolve. But then she breathes in, out, compresses her lips. Betha has been by her side for months, feeding her, cleaning her, trying to offer her solace. She mended her wedding dress without thought. She's just a girl. She has her life ahead of her. She can't stay here. "You can come to your feet and follow us out into the snow. It won't be an easy trek, but we will make it together, all of us left here. We will rejoin the world. You can help your daughter make it to a better place, help her become a woman, find safety
with her, possibly love and grand things."

"Or?"

Only the Dragon Queen in her countenance, she lifts her chin, lifts a brow. Says, "Or you can die tonight and join your other children. Betha will have no reason to stay and waste away with you then. Either way, you will set her free."

"You'll take care of her?" Lady Flint croaks.

"It's her mother's job to take care of her," she answers, merciless. "I will take her with me and give her a chance."

Daenerys wouldn't have come into this room if she'd not braced for the worst. That said, she still feels disappointment spike in her heart when the woman eventually inhales bravely and nods, making no move to leave her bed. When she says, "Tell my girl … I love her."

The small bite of anger at a mother's weakness gives the queen what she needs to pick up a pillow and dig a knee into her chest. Pressing the pillow over her face with all her strength, ignoring the horror of her actions, ignoring the scream of her half healed hip. Lady Flint begins to writhe after a moment, struggling halfheartedly, the body's instinct impossible to override. She doesn't ease up, suffocating her, refuses to let up, not even when her fingers start grasping at her hair, her shoulder, her jaw, trying to fight her off. That doesn't mean anything. That's reflex. She needs to see something real. She needs to know she's decided.

When Lady Flint flails blindly towards the bedside, snatching up the candle there, swinging it towards her attacker…

That's when Daenerys is convinced.

Releasing her, she bats the candle aside and backs away from the bed, puts a safe distance between them as Lady Flint throws herself upright. She slams back against the headboard, knees drawn up, gasping for breath. She's got wild eyes and a will to live, looking at Daenerys in shock and betrayal and panic. It's enough. It's a start.

"We leave at break of light," the queen informs her.
Chapter 23

Chapter Notes

In case anybody is still reading this:

Sorry for vanishing on SURVIVAL. Suffice to say a series of unfortunate events forced me to an unexpected hiatus, various mental illness episodes, medical emergencies, natural disasters, and home reno mishaps, the kind that leave you in a house stripped to the studs and loose plywood tossed down over exposed joists with no running water and only enough wiring fed to the panel box so that you have to unplug the AC when you need to use the microwave, just as an example of the theatric productions that've kept me too busy to write. I never responded to messages because I forced myself to stay away so that I wouldn't end up giving out false promises. I wanted to have something to offer first.

I haven't seen season 8, and now I don't think I intend to, but I've heard the bullet points and watched a few clips of key scenes, and it was all so disappointingly in line with what I'd expected that I felt the need to reaffirm my love for the POTENTIAL of this universe. And because I figured some of you might enjoy a diversion to a less hopeless version of events and characterizations, I rushed to get this chapter out, haven't done much editing, so forgive any sloppiness.

[SPOILERS]
It is less hopeless, I promise, however it seems at this point in the story. The outline of SURVIVAL was complete by the time I'd even written chapter ten, and season 8's resolutions affected none of that. Though I did add in a little comfort food for this chapter. Anyway, my point is, what I always meant by HARD TIMES BUT HAPPY ENDINGS is that it will be happy. However pessimistic the characters get, this ends on just straight joy, no bittersweet. Though apparently the word bittersweet means all around miserable for some people, LOL. That's not where SURVIVAL is going. By the time we reach the end here, our core family will be deliriously happy, wolves and dragons and babies, everybody happy and alive and finding their new purposes post that game of thrones lifestyle. That's the point of escapism.

This chapter is a little slow, I know, I'm sorry, but we've finally wrapped up the dreamwalking thread and the next chapter is the penultimate culmination of the current arc. FYI: Chapter 24 - Meet Me On The Battlefield.

Also, Missandei hundred percent lives. Whatever dread she might feel herself, nobody's killing off Missandei of Naath. Fucking nobody. So don't even worry about that. In fact, after that particular scene, I'm pretty inspired to put HER on the damn throne. Dracarys all over the place.

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Running With Wolves

“Kill the masters, kill the masters,” he murmurs madly in his sleep. Tormented. Desperation in the
rasping hush of his voice.

She turns over where she lies beside him, reading by the dwindling candlelight. The book falls and her fingers reach for his brow instead, skimming across the sweat there, smoothing away the taut pain. She presses her mouth against his ear and soothes him with nonsense words until his fists unclench from the furs and his body eases its rigidity. He’s half awake as her mouth moves from his ear to his lips, lingering there until he’s fully aware, until his ragged breath calms.

Then she says, “Only dreams, my Unsullied. Dreams cannot hurt us.”

Grey Worm looks up at her with an aching wonder. For a moment, it seems he will bite his tongue and bury his troubles, so as not to burden her. But they are always honest with one another, open to only each other. So she waits for him to find the words, watching patiently as the struggle flickers across his vulnerable face. At last, he confesses, “I dreamed you were brought to the top of a pyramid. I dreamed you fell.”

“No more pyramids,” she reassures, just the shy edges of a smile, stroking his temple as she leans on her elbow.

He shuts his eyes and yearns into her touch. “Last night, I dreamed you were taken by the ice. I dreamed my Missandei’s skin was cold and her eyes blue.” Running a careful worshipful hand along the blade of her bare shoulder, his eyes re-open to study the jut of her collarbone, the few freckles on her smooth bay skin there. “Before that, I dreamed my Missandei was returned to her chains, returned to her master, and I could not get to her.”

It is inevitable, these thoughts. For people like them, it was always inevitable. But now, here at the end of the world, they all have them now. Even the privileged, the sheltered, even they have been lowered down to the levels of resigned despair that freedmen have known. The night has never been darker, everything they’ve gained falling apart around them so quickly now. Yet her faith has never been stronger.

“There is nowhere in this world you could not get to me. And I am not afraid of chains.”

But he is not soothed. He swallows hard and catches her hand in his grasp, pulling it down to his chest, his thundering heart, holding it there. “I am afraid. I am … terrified. I dream every night of a new way I fail you. Lose you. I fear I cannot fulfill my duty and keep you safe both. I fear…”

“What is it?” she whispers.

“I fear what becomes of me if you were gone.”

She is worried by that, more worried than all the thoughts of her possible suffering or their grave fates. “Becomes of you? We have endured worse in this world, each of us. If something should happen, you would endure that as well.” She needs to believe this to comfort herself, but his feverish sleep mutters echo ominously in her ears.

*Kill the masters, kill the masters.*

She remembers the red writing on the wall, the gold masks of the Harpies as they terrorized, the burning fires and the never-ending bloodshed. She remembers the feel of rough thick metal and leather against her throat as her slave collar weighed on her. She remembers when her existence was lonely and hopeless, constructed from pain and humiliations, and the only treatment she’d ever known was malice.

It was meant to be a call to arms. A sign of hope. *Kill the masters.* But the dangerous nightmare is of
being caught in that cycle, never able to succeed and move forward. Kill the masters and be free, it meant. But what if there’s nothing else? What if there’s nothing but masters? Nothing but killing? What if all this that they’ve experienced in these last years wasn’t what it seemed? What if what they were building towards was an illusion? What if they’re not really climbing uphill to reach the ultimate peak? That peak of sunrise, built of freedom and peace and happiness and love.

At his words, she succumbs to the temptation of desolation, what she’s been stubbornly avoiding all this time. She imagines a darker future, imagines the man she loves with nothing left to lose, nothing left to hope for, imagines him fixated on what can never be. It is a familiar story. Killing, endlessly killing, searching for solace in cruel places. It breaks her heart. How very far they have come from where they began. She cannot bear the thought of going backward.

“No.” He lifts her hand to his mouth, kisses her palm, head shaking, a sudden fervency coming over him, an urgency that she need understand. Her thoughts have already gone far ahead of him, already understanding before he has said a word, but he struggles. “Before Missandei, I knew only duty. No fear, no hatred, no longing. All that the masters did to me, took from me, I did not know differently, so I did not hate. Now I am changed. You have filled me up with a great many things inside. Now I feel. Now I want. Now I hope. I think of what lies ahead, of what could be, and I have become … attached … to the possibilities. If I cannot keep you safe, if I do not deliver you to the future you deserve, I fear there will be nothing left for me but the new rage.”

“Like so many of the people around us, consumed by the killing, worn down to where they live for their bloodthirst and their rage. Yes, I know what you speak of. I know what you fear.”

“I do not fear it for my sake. I fear it for yours.”

“But that is not you. That will never be you, my Unsullied.” She edges until she is lain fully on top of him, presses her brow into his own, closing her eyes. Feeling their hearts beat together. “You will not lose me,” she whispers against his lips, “but if you ever did, you would must remember who you are.”

Grey Worm touches fingertips tentatively to the small of her back, finding her spine, then firming the touch, splaying his hand wide, dragging it up to her shoulder blades, pressing her down into him, shuddering out another raw breath. “I am nothing without my Missandei from the isle of Naath.”

“Tell me you love me…”

He hears her voice on the wind. All the terror and dread and stress he’s been holding onto, wound so tight, about to snap, it all unwinds at the sound of her voice, at those softly spoken words. The excruciating knot inside is unraveling, leaving him in exquisite relief. The sun is in his eyes when he turns around, following the sound. It blinds him for a moment, which is another kind of relief, because he’s almost forgotten what a gold sun feels like, what the world looks like when it’s green and blue and bathed in sunlight. There’s no grey, no white, no ice. Winter has come and gone again. The Long Night is over. It’s day again and warm again and everything is so fucking colorful. And she’s there. Standing there, just ahead, so fucking beautiful. For an unending moment, he can’t breathe.

“Jon?” she calls, her tone expectant.

His eyes adjust to the blinding light and there she is. His silver goddess.

She grins at him, playful, joyous, eyes glimmering, as if there’s not a care left in the world, as if
everything’s alright now. It’s over, they’ve won, and the future is bright.

“Tell you I love you?” he echoes. “Always.” He starts moving towards her, crossing the distance of green between them. “Whenever you need to hear it. That’s my job as your husband, isn’t it?” So much green. She didn’t seem so far away when he first turned, but getting to her is taking such a long time. “Why? Have you forgotten already?”

“Maybe I’m afraid of you forgetting,” she murmurs thoughtfully, a sudden shadow passing over her face, which had been so open and easy a second ago. “You won’t forget me, will you, Jon?”

“How could I? You’re right here with me.”

“And when I’m gone?”

“Where are you going?” he asks, rather than reassure her. There’s a spike of panic in his throat, an awareness of terrible things trying to fight its way through the halcyon haze. Things he doesn’t want to remember. Things he doesn’t want to think of now. He just wants to reach her. He wants her in his arms again. He wants to bask in that playful glimmer. But the panic is cloying. His stride pushes quicker, becoming urgent, but she’s not getting any closer and frustration flares. Why is she still so far away? “Dany? Where are you going?”

“I don’t know yet.”

“Dany?”

She lifts a hand and lays it over her heart, rubbing at something beneath her dress. “I don’t know, Jon. I just know I’m afraid. I just know I miss you.” Then she takes a step forward, a step towards him, and suddenly the distance isn’t so far after all. Suddenly he’s coming to a stop right in front of her and he’s reaching for her and she’s there in his grasp. Pressing her brow into his, sighing, “I don’t want you to forget me.” His arms close around her and she clutches at his biceps, fingers digging in as she admits, “I don’t want the world to think I was something I wasn’t. I want them to see me. The real me.”

He’s more confused than panicked now that he has ahold of her, but comforts absently, “They do. We all do.”

“I’m afraid.”

“We all are.”

But he feels her head shaking desperately against him. He can hardly make out the words when she whispers, “I’m afraid of me. What’s inside of me.”

“Dany…”

She pulls away, wrenching herself out of his arms when he tries to hold on, and the panic returns. “You don’t know, Jon. You don’t know what has happened.”

“Then tell me.”

“You won’t understand.”

“Explain it to me.”

She whirls back to him, exclaiming harshly, “How do I do that when I don’t even understand?” But
when he catches her wrist so she can’t get away, she calms again, softens. Looks up at him with something uncharacteristically plaintive in her eyes. “What if they’re right about me?”

“How?”

“Them! My enemies, my doubters, my—” She cuts off sharply, swallows the word down, forces herself to bring it right back up to her tongue. Says in a strangely small voice, “My victims.”

“Right about what exactly?” he questions cautiously, trying to figure out what she needs to hear. Trying to figure out what is happening. What he’s missed.

“That I’m a monster. That I’m everything I’ve fought against. That I’m the one the world needs protection from.”

“How is that possible when you’re the one that’s saved us?”

“Have I? I’ve broken chains, but have I saved anyone? Have I done anything but destroy? We’re not winning this war, Jon. We’re dying. And what happens if…” She falters again, slipping her wrist out of his grip, slowly but pointedly. She turns her back on him and climbs the hill, leaving him to follow.

When they settle into stillness again, they’re side by side at the edge of the dropoff, staring out over the sheltered meadow and the rushing waterfall and the caves carved in the cliffs above. The sight hits him hard, scouring him raw and exposed, bringing him right back to those memories, that time in his life, their incredible days here. It leaves him defenseless.

But not her…

She’s gone cold. Her expression is impassive and her voice is hollow when she says, “The choice it comes down to in the end? That’s what I fear. When final hope is crushed and all that remains is hate? When all you have left is hate, what is there for you to do but burn the world to the ground and reign in its ashes?”

A quiet sort of horror overtakes him at those words, at the emptiness in the sound of them. The desolation. It’s the antithesis of who Daenerys Stormborn is, what the core of her is made of. She’s the one that returned hope to his existence. She’s the one that gave him better dreams to strive for than anything he’d ever dared imagine before her. She’s the one that brought possibility open wide. So to hear her of all people say such a thing…

If this is the way she’s really feeling now, she’s right to be afraid.

It’s a terrifying thought.

It’s the exact thought that made him so wary of her in the beginning. Before he knew her, before he took that leap of faith and chose to trust her, to bury his belief into her.

“Hope is never final. There’s always more of it out there to find. You taught me that. And anyway, you’ll never have to face that choice. You’ll never have to find out the answer, because you’ll never be left with nothing but hate. You’ve too much in this world still to lose. You’ve too much to love.”

“I know.”

“Well, it doesn’t sound like it.” Horror, panic, relief, dread, all the turmoil swirls in him, but a new flare of anger subdues all that. “It sounds like you’re the one forgetting. Why? Where are you, Dany? What’s happening where you are that you’ve forgotten what we’re fucking fighting for?” He’s
missed her so much, he didn’t expect to find himself angry with her. But she’s acting so strangely, so
unlike herself. He wants to talk to Dany, his Dany, wants to see his wife in her eyes, the woman he’s
been looking for, not this eerie unnerving creature. “If nothing else, if you’ve been pushed to the
point you don’t even care about the rest of us anymore, everybody counting on you, everybody that
put all their damn faith in you, I’d think you’d still remember that our son is worth more.”

The emptiness falls from her face just that easily. Blankness crumbles into grief and desperation. She
turns her head to look at him, eyes shining. She whispers brokenly, “I remember.”

“Then what is this?!” he demands.

No words, but in answer, she reaches for the collar of her dress and pulls it apart, exposing the ugly
open wound in her chest, black and mangled. Jon jerks back, struck with it, staggering a step in
horrified denial, before he surges closer, slamming his palm over the wound, his fingers twisting
between her own. He can’t breathe. He doesn’t understand. It races madly through his mind. But he
can’t make sense of it. He can’t make sense of any of this.

“You’re alright,” he rasps, guttural, visceral, refusing to accept the obvious answer. “Dany, you’re
alright. This is… You’re right here. You’re right here with me. I’m not talking to a ghost. You’re still
here.”

“I’m still here,” she confirms, reaching over and encircling his wrist so that she’s clutching his hand
with both her own. “But I don’t know what I am or what happens after this.”

“Explain,” he growls in frustration. He needs her to say she’s still alive, she’s still out there, he’s still
got time to find her and bring his family back together. He can’t be too late.

“What was done to him, he did to me.”

“The Night King?” She nods. “The dragonglass in his heart.” He breathes out, realization dawning,
heavy and devastated. “He killed you.”

“Changed me. I don’t think I really died. He drove his dagger into my heart and he left a shard of it
inside. His magic tried to overtake mine, but it is failing. For now, I remain myself.”

“For now?”

“I don’t know, Jon. I don’t know.”

“Hating the world. Burning it to ash. That came from him? That’s what he wants?”

“No, Jon,” she confesses, voice small again. “Those were my thoughts. My fears. There is so much
rage inside of me. So much hatred. For what was done to me, for what I’ve suffered, and all the
suffering I’ve seen. For all the cruelty in this world. All my life, I’ve fought against my worst
impulses. I’ve fought to hold that wrath at bay. Compassion at war with spite.”

“Dany—”

“I’ve been so happy since you and Jaeh, so hopeful with how far we’ve all come, but now… What if
that’s not strong enough? What if I can’t resist the touch of Ice and Death? What if it brings out those
dark things inside me? That’s what he saw in me. That’s why he did this. What if he’s right?”

“He’s wrong.”

“What if?”
“If he weren’t, then he would win. You would be by his side, not mine, and the world would be nothing but ice and ash in the end. The world would die.”

“Yes.”

“You know this, you know that’s the answer to what if, so why ask the question?”

She laughs suddenly, a choked watery relief, shaking her head, pulling away from him. It’s such an inappropriate reaction, so incongruous to the realities, but they share a smile, getting caught in each other’s gaze. With a sadder laugh, she drops to the ground in a pile of skirt, scrubbing at her wet cheeks, working on packing all that frenzied distress away again.

“He’s wrong,” Jon repeats, calmer this time, steadier, setting aside his panic and accepting the situation with forced pragmatism. “So you have dragonglass in your heart. So what? You walked through fucking fire the first time I met you. You were already made of magic.”

When she raises a hand in offer, he clasps it without hesitation, white knuckling their fingers together, letting her tug him down beside her. They fall back and tangle up in the grass, wrapping that original halcyon haze around them once more, a respite, a safe haven, refuge against all the realities that await them as soon as they must leave this place behind.

“The siren song of the fire was hard enough to resist before. But now?” she murmurs, propping her chin on his chest. “The zealots think I was born from Flame and Shadow, you know, to serve as his vessel. Just as the Night King is the vessel of the Great Other, so they say. Now I have a sliver from Ice and Death wedged inside me as well. The eternal struggle personified, I suppose. An eternal war of two gods, waging itself within my body while it rages outside of us. Ice versus fire. Night versus light. Death versus life.”

“I hardly think fire is life,” he replies, his free hand sinking into the loose thick of her hair at the nape of her neck, petting and twisting in it. Arguing semantics to avoid buckling under burdens. “It kills everything it touches.”

“Cleanses, purifies. Fire is the most alive thing there is. Life too is a destructive force.”

Jon just hums, too distracted for any more philosophy talk. Too troubled. His wrist moves, slowly but surely winding her hair around his hand over and over, tightening, clutching her closer in fear and anger and love as the possessive animal buried deep down rises. The thing he tries to usually quell. “You’re your own queen. You’re the people’s queen. You’re my queen. Always. The one thing you will never be is his Night Queen.”

“I am out of my depth,” she admits. “He knows more than we do. He could—”

“That’s not going to happen,” he cuts her off, catches her jaw between his thumb and forefinger, forcing her to meet his glare. Vows fiercely, “I’ll destroy him myself before he ever gets near you again. I don’t care if he’s a god’s vessel or the damn god or death itself. He can’t have you. Understand? I won’t let him take you from me.”

“What if that’s not enough? If I become the threat when he falls?”

“No more what ifs,” Jon commands. “Don’t let him screw with your head. Look forward, like we always do. Focus on what this is for. Remember your purpose.”

“I set my sights too high at the start,” she muses miserably. “It makes the failure greater.”

“We’ve not failed yet,” he counters. Hooks a stray silver lock behind her ear before he curves a hand
behind her neck and pulls her to his mouth for a wet desperate kiss.

Jon gets lost in that kiss. The haze resettles over them, slowing time down, blurring the world and its worries away once more. As his hand grazes down along all her contours, something else sharpens into focus. The surrealness of this place had distorted his awareness of it, but once his palm is cradling the heavy swell of her stomach beneath the disguising dress, it’s all he can see. He breaks from her, pushing her up just enough to survey her, thumb stroking the curve of her as his palm presses firmer into the underside, taking the weight. Is this a memory? Of how she was with Jaeh? No. No, this is…

“Is this a fantasy? Some future imagining?”

Dany gives him a sad smile. “No, my love, this is very real.”

Mournfully, “I’m missing it again.” He suspected before they parted, but with everything going on, he just wasn’t ready to face it. One child in exile on Dragonstone, another on the way within a mother determined to keep on the frontline. For the second time, it’s the worst possible moment for making a baby. He knows this. That’s why he’s terrified again. But he also knows he’s unreasonably happy, feeling her curve, feeling the fluttery thwacking under his palm.

The myriad implications don’t even occur to him until she says, “Jon,” in a clear grim voice, pushing upright. “Don’t be happy. We can’t afford to be happy. We can’t love this baby, not yet, not until we know what it is.”

“What it is?” he echoes harshly, swinging upward himself. “It’s our child.”

“You don’t know that.” she whispers. Her hand lays over his own, over her swollen stomach, her second hand brushing her wounded heart. “We don’t know what this means for me, let alone what it could’ve done to the child. If it is even a child anymore. So please don’t be happy.”

But what she’s insinuating is so horrific an idea, he can’t even entertain it. “Missandei told me that you felt this way about Jaeh too. You were so afraid he would be stillborn, like Rhaego, that you refused to love him until you’d held him screaming and thrashing in your arms.”

“This isn’t the same.”

“A witch claimed to curse you barren. Your babe died in your womb. Of course you would fear for the next one. And now… Now something terrible has happened again.”

“We don’t know how this will affect her.”

Jon blinks. “Her?” But she just gives him an exasperated look, not wanting to expound on that, so he continues stubbornly, “Now something terrible has happened, but that doesn’t mean this babe will be the worse for it.” Another kick at his palm and he smiles, hope brightening his eyes. “Whatever magic you’re made of, it’s fought off the dragonglass effect so far, you said. I believe it will protect our child as well. I believe you will prevail in this inner war, as we will prevail in the outer, and Jaeh will get the chance to be an incredible big brother.”

There are tears slipping from her eyes again, but her lips slide slowly into a smile. “I want to believe that.”

“So believe it.”

Dany gives him a watery laugh, getting her knees under her to perch on her haunches, bringing both hands up to stroke her thumbs against his temples, her fingers raking into his unkempt curls, pulling
them back from his face. She spends a heady moment studying his features, leaving him impatient, before she leans in. She drags her lips down from his brow, along the bridge of his nose, catching his own with soft little nips of her teeth to make him grin under her attentions. Her fingers twist hard and tug, yanking his head back, exposing his throat to her. Something between laughter and a pained lusting groan escapes him. His arms encircle her, smothering the urgency, gently urging her forward instead, encouraging her into his lap, if she wants to come.

“How is it you are here?” he asks, staring dazedly at the sky, the curiosity and confusion finally catching up through the more compelling concerns.

“Practicing new extents to old talents,” is all she answers.

Struggling for clear thoughts through the rising arousal she stirs, he looks around at the meadow, really taking it in, their perpetual haven.

“How do you still long for this place then?” he wonders, genuinely surprised, though he’s unsure why. She’s said before this was her happiest time. For him as well. He supposes, after all these years, he’d assumed it would’ve become Dragonstone or Winterfell. They spent so little time here in comparison. Then again, perhaps that’s why it remains the fantasy, the old idealized memory. Halcyon dreams. “It was a simpler time. Less burdens to carry. For us both.”

“Mmm,” she hums, running a distracted hand along his shoulder before it trails down his chest. “Not just simpler…” At his questioning look, she grins again, a bit wicked now, a bit teasing. “You may have king’s blood, but you’re a wildling at heart. My wolf. Freer in the wilderness.”

Jon laughs.

“You’ve got animal in you,” she purrs, voice going slow and throaty in that way which drives him crazy. His hands tighten on her back, restraining himself from grabbing her up too roughly. “I said that to you the night we met, but I had no idea just how right I was. How true it is for us both. I feel it now more than ever.” And she punctuates her words by sinking her teeth in the tendon of his neck. When he bucks against her, she slaps her palms to his chest and slams him down onto his back, moving to straddle him. “It’s why we were so good here, out in the wild, living to abandon.”

Darkness lingers on the horizon, but all he can see is Dany. Blackening clouds stirring above, wind rustling her long silver tresses, thunder echoing in the distance.

When it begins to rain, he tries to swing upright, to shield her, but she holds him down. As it falls heavier and harsher by the second, he protests, “We’ll never make it up to the cave in this.”


With Dany here, the storm doesn’t matter. None of it matters. There’s an unwarranted giddiness swelling inside him, washing away the distress, the dread, the exhaustion. It revitalizes him. She revives him. Reminds him what happiness feels like. He’s scrabbling impatiently at the excesses of her dress, acres of colorful silk in his way, desperate for it to be gone, wild to touch her, feel her, see her again. Once he rips it over her head and tosses it aside, baring her body to the torrid rain, to his hungering gaze, he spends a moment appreciating the view, soaking in the missed sight, the changes in her, the scars, the swells, before he snaps. Wraps his arms around her again, grabbing her up, rolling with her, attacking her throat, Dany’s head thrown back in laughter as she lands.

The sound is warm this time, melodic, humorous rather than the bitter and broken one of before.

“Missed you,” he mutters into her wet skin, over and over, grazing, roaming, mapping every piece of
her, torn between the dark responses of her new wounds and the joy at rediscovering her. “My wife. Missed you.”

Lying lazily in the aftermath, she traces a fingertip across his chest in mystery patterns, drawing with the warm summer rainfall. “The ice won’t hurt either,” she says at last. “Not for you.”

“What does that mean?”

“I’ve figured it out.” She reaches for his hand, pulls it up between them, stroking the old burnt scar tissue of his palm. Turns her wrist, presses her matching scar into his. “In my dreams, I’ve seen you touch what burns me and endure unharmed. You survive the ice like I walk through the fire. It’s how you survived Beyond the Wall when you fell into the water and should’ve been dead but came back to me instead.”

“I don’t know how to argue with you,” he says, even though it seems absurd, thinking of himself with some fantastical gift of magic like Dany or the Night King. That’s just not Jon. But he remembers the Silver Wedding, wrapping his ungloved hand around the ice spear. He remembers falling into the water when Viserion died, the freezing, the lifelessness, the way it should’ve been impossible, surviving that, clawing his way out of the ice, riding back to Eastwatch.

“As I am the fire, kissed by the god of Flame and Shadow, and he is the dark, raised by the god of Ice and Death, I suspect you were blessed by your Old Gods of the Forest.”

Summoned by her assertion, wolves cry in the vast distance, competing with the cacophony of the thunderstorm. The summer begins cooling, rain prickling at his skin, losing its warmth. He reaches for his leathers, wrapping it around her to shield her from the onslaught, but Dany just smiles, presses her mouth against his with one more laugh.

“We should come back here, after the fighting is done,” he suggests, musing against the shell of her ear as he holds her close under the rainfall. “We could build a cabin in the valley. Grow old to the roar of the waterfall. The dragons have their caves, my wolf will have the woods… Our babies would have flowers.”

“You think we could find it again? Remember our way back?”

“We’ll retrace our steps.”

“It would have to be a castle, you realize. A cabin would never suffice. There are too many people I’m unwilling to leave behind.”

“Alright, a castle then.”

“Alright,” Dany singsongs.

He hasn’t seen her so happy in such a long time. It’s surreal, dreamlike in its detachment from justification, but it feels… She glows with joy, drenched with freezing rain in the battered grass, mud slicking her naked body, huddled shivering against him, his leathers thrown on her shoulders. His heart feels like it’ll burst, so full by the sight of her. His Dany, his unborn in her belly, Jaehaerys waiting for them across the bay.

Everything is…

The storm abates, thunder and lightning overtaken by mist and wind. Rain dwindling, ice crawling across the meadow. His panic for Dany is muted before it even has time to spike, buried down, blurred out by a fog of confusion. Ice takes over as the wolves and their howling capture Jon’s focus.
They are there, just over the ridge, just beyond the mist, and he finds himself transfixed. The world changes so fast, it spins his head, but compulsion draws him to his feet, draws him after the howling.

“Jon?” he hears Dany, somewhere behind him, somewhere past the need. She scrambles up after him, catches his arm, trying to slow him down. Her fingers are heat and softness on his jaw, turning his head back towards her, forcing him to meet her bright worried eyes. “Jon,” she murmurs, a sadness returning. “Stay with me. Jon, please… Stay.”

But the wolf calls from beyond the hills.

*It’s Ghost,* she realizes, with his red eyes and kindred soul, that gives Jon the protections he needs against the ice. Immunity to the ice. That’s what Not Solely Bran had been teaching her in her dreamwalking. It’s through his ties to Ghost. She can only pray it’s true, what the raven tells her, only pray it’s enough.

There are things she knows now, things she has faith in, has come to understand with an unreasonable clarity coming out of her fever. She feels like one of Kinvara’s foolish acolytes, so sure in their knowledge of nothing, of the imagination. But she is sure. She is foolish and she is sure and she cannot change her mind.

Kissed by the Old Gods of the Forest, her love, her wolf.

He’s the sword in the darkness. The shield between ice and men. She’s the fire that burns against the cold. The light bringing the dawn. Together, they can succeed. She must believe that. She must have faith in it. If she can only make it to him in time, they can win this. They will survive. It’s the only thing holding her up on her feet.

And it is a hard task, up on her feet, climbing, hiking, pushing through the agony of her half healed body to cross the distance. Bearing the biting wind and the starving white wasteland that provides no sustenance or shelter. She doesn’t make a sound, she doesn’t cry out, not buckle or break or give into the temptation of exploiting her position and take strong Cayn up on his offers to carry her. She just keeps going.

He’s needed as an outrider, their hunter, needs to retain his strength.

She sets ahead with Drogon hobbling gracelessly along and the Flints follow, despite their trepidations, because her chin is lifted high and nothing but confidence on her face.

The bay between Widow’s Watch and the Vale has frozen solid, so they cross. On foot, hauling their sparse supplies in packs. She’d thought the hardest part would be scaling down the cliffside to reach the bay. Then they reach the other side and must scale upward. Her body has never hurt so bad. But the shortcut is worth the effort, straight from the peninsula across to the Fingers instead of traveling so far southwest to cross the Neck. It cuts a lot off their journey, and it was necessary, since the scout said the Neck was overrun with Others. But it’s a hard trek through the mountains of the Vale in the best conditions, never mind now that it’s a tundra.

Harrowing is a soft word for it.

There’s thirteen of them when they start out.

The first night, they become eleven.

The old man Yandel lays down and is found frozen solid by dawn. He saved her. Healed her. And
she let the ice take him. Another loses his footing on the scale and falls to the rocks. Lady Flint slips as well, on the ascent this time, screaming and flailing through the air, but Drogon is quick enough to snatch her in his talons before she is crushed.

With a horde glimpsed at the edges of the Neck, White Harbor and its region overrun, her fears have been confirmed of the battle she abandoned. The Others have pushed past Winterfell. What that means for Jon’s armies... She forces herself not to contemplate the realities. She focuses only on what she can affect right now. She focuses only on her immediate goal. She’s dreamwalked with Jon. She knows he still lives. For now, that must suffice.

They hike south by foot through killer winter, picking up refugees as they go, whoever they come across, strays and rogues and desperate encampments. Nine becomes thirty, growing every day, every kilometer. A ragged khas of survivors left behind by the exodus efforts, isolated from aid, arduously making their trek towards the remainder of civilization.

The hill tribes cause them trouble once or twice, accosting them, trying to steal from them. But at the height of conflict, Drogon returns from his hunting trip, scrabbling across jagged mountains they can’t traverse, descending abruptly on his arrival, and their harassers soon change their minds. She corrals the tribes into her khas and they keep moving, ever onward through the ice.

Between the cold, the strain of the trek, the starvation, and the sickness picked up from their only water source being melted ice, her haggard khas loses as many as they accrue.

Starved, savage, she ducks under Drogon’s bent neck one day and sticks herself right into the middle of his ravenous meal, tearing at the charred meat with bare hands, bringing chunks up to chew, ignoring the pain in her jaw, stiffened from the cold.

At first, Cayn is the only one brave enough to follow her lead, picking pieces to bring over to weakened Betha Flint and her mother. Drogon growls menacingly at him, but Daenerys elbows at his jaw, hushing him. “Share, my love. We must share.” And as the dragon eventually resigns himself, the rest of the migrators venture it for themselves.

Weeks into their journey, they run into something even more dangerous than the straggler hordes of wights they’ve been encountering, ranging parties that’ve slipped past the northern front. Most are easily enough dispatched by Drogon’s breath, or dismembered with swords. At the lower edge of Snakewood Forest, though, they find themselves surrounded by behemoth wolves, emerging from the trees, penning them like lambs.

Before the men can throw themselves forward with their war cries and start hacking, Daenerys quells the khas to stillness, thwarting a massacre. Facing off with the beast that creeps forward, staring into the woman’s soul. And as Drogon snarls, she lays a distracted hand to his hide, restraining his aggression, eyes never breaking from the wolf. Letting the beast measure her as she did when she first came nose to nose with Ghost.

Unlike that day, she’s no longer terrified.

*Nymeria’s pack*, she recognizes, remembering Arya’s stories of her wolf, alpha to wild ones, crossing Beyond the Wall and back. The wolves watch them eerily, heads low, but they don’t attack. It gives her hope. Faith in the Old Gods as her allies in this war, through the Starks. Her fever dreams have opened her mind wide, honed her instincts.

What she doesn’t expect is a red hulking Tormund among the wolf pack, blundering from the woods as their standoff resolves itself, him and an odd tribe of wildling Northmen, shock on his face as he catches sight of the dragon and its mother. Shock before jubilation.
“Jon thought you died at the Wall. He’ll be grateful to see you alive and kicking.”

The wildling pushes through the crowd and grabs her up into a crass hug. “Aye, and I’m thrilled to see you still kicking, Dragon Queen!” he crows, his boisterous joy infectious, surprising a laugh out of her. She’s too surprised to react at first, but when the warmth and strength of his big body registers, she grasps onto it, savoring such easy affection.

Having narrowly survived the Fall of Eastwatch, he regales them that night by campfires of the days he spent frozen and trapped under collapsed towers of ice, the rubble that entombed him being the only reason the Others marched right past instead of slaughtering him and his men. Then the pack found them, and life had gotten crazy enough that letting wolves lead them south didn’t seem any crazier than anything else, so they followed. Winding down the frozen continent, avoiding the roving hordes, headed somewhere.

“I couldn’t tell ya where or what for. I’m not King Crow, don’t talk to dogs. But I figure they saved our asses at the Wall, so maybe they know what they’re doing. Seen crazier shit.”

Dany can’t quite disagree.

That night, as the rest of the caravan huddles into tents, piling up by the dozen to share body heat and sleep before they set out again, Tormund drops himself with a huff beside where she lingers, staring into the flames. He puts his arm around her shoulders, hugs her to his side in the blizzard bite, keeping her warm. She’s too cold, too hot, too tired, too restless, too grateful for Jon’s friend’s unlikely survival to even take umbrage at the audacity, the presumed familiarity. She just leans in, feeling a little awkwardly like a child tucked into a father’s lap.

“Hard to tell under all these bulks, but it feels like you’re hefting around another wolf pup,” he quips. “Did King Crow knock you up again, Dragon Queen? In the middle of an apocalypse?”

She grins back, not balking at the lewdness in his. “That he did.”

They go less hungry from then on, because Nymeria’s pack hunts well, herding prey back to the khas, taking down animals within their reach. More readily sharing with the humans than Drogon’s begrudging efforts, his disdain for having to help them eat. The pack is a polar opposite to the way of the dragons. Herding even for Drogon, when his broken wing slows him down, when the cold makes him too lethargic, dragon and wolves hunting together.

“Well, y’know it’s the end of the world when that happens,” Tormund jokes.

The sight gives her hope for the future. Warms her frostbitten heart.

Every night as they camp, she writhes under heavy furs, bodies bundled all around her within the tents, ice and fire inside her, shivering, sweating. She struggles with the new grasp on her innate traits, fumbling to harness it, to dreamwalk, to find Jon. She found him in the meadow by accident, falling into the dreamscape like any other, but since then, since the wolf’s howl drew him away, when she reaches out to him now, there’s nothing but blackness and cold in her soul. It chases her away, forces her to recoil and close herself to him. So she turns instead towards Dragonstone, towards Jaeh and Rhaegal. She wants to see her sons. She wants to feel her baby in her arms, in her lap, his warm soft skin pressed against hers, her nose in his wild curls, that sweet smell. But she has far from mastered this trick and she never quite manages to find him.

Perhaps it is only Jon she can connect to, only creatures like the raven and the priestess and the shadowbinder. Only fellow dreamwalkers.
Crossing a half frozen lake signals the end of their harshest terrain, entrance of a somewhat easier path. On the other side of the lake is a valley and stoneworks in the distance.

_Strongsong._ She recognizes the landmarks, amidst the unrecognizably changed landscape. Dany was here last year when she and Drogon fetched Lady Belmore and the last few evacuees that got trapped at the keep. Which means they’re nearing the Riverlands border.

They waylay at the abandoned Strongsong castle for a few weeks, to rest and restock supplies, having headed just western enough to avoid most of the Mountains of the Moon. Thick forests and rocky foothills, a dangerous wilderness, a stony track. Extremely slow going, between the impossible terrain and the battering weather and the wounded, and also having to work to detour wight hordes. The wildlings have expertise in journeys like this, but they don’t know the land, so they and the Westerosi rely on each other.

Once upon a time, she had thought her desperate khas across the Red Waste was eclectic. Now they have become a wolf pack, a wounded dragon, a lost queen, stranded northerners and abandoned wildlings.

_Daenerys Stormborn told that should I desire, to take my brave Unsullied commander and sail far from this cold dark land. Return to Naath, to its white sands and warm sun._” She sits in front of him on the horse, shoved stiffly together in the too small saddle, his arms around her to hold the reins, his chest firm at her back, supporting her, even as her hips ache. “I wish to see it before I die.”

“I will take you there.”

“I will never ask you to abandon your duty. I will never abandon mine. We must be here for when our queen comes back for us.”

“Missandei from the isle of Naath…” His arms tighten, past secure and into crushing, his breath on her skin leaving her to shiver, to arch into him, neck turning so that her nose brushes his jaw. “You are to me what she is to us. My queen. My … world.” Throaty, rasping, the sound of him in her ear makes her want off this horse. Makes her want to drag him back to their tent and straddle his face. Even as the thought brings a blush to her dark cheeks, startling her in how stark and crass and visceral it strikes her. “Say to me yes and I will bring you home to the white sands and warm sun.”

She only sighs, resigned to duty before desire. “Let us just dream of that day. Once our work here is accomplished.” But she can’t shake the inevitability she feels in her soul, more certain with every passing day as the world grows colder and darker.

She will never see Naath again.

She will never go home. She will never be warm again. She will die here before this war is over and the Dawn has risen.

In her weakest moments, it takes all she has inside to hold her tongue, to not turn to her love and plead, Come, let us run, let us go and hide and be happy before the end.

When she confesses this weakness to him, Grey Worm cups her face in his hands and tells her in a quietly fervent voice, “I do not care how dark it grows. I have never felt such happiness. I am happy, right here, right here with my Missandei.”
"Darkness calls for her," Melisandre tells him, staring into the flame with that fervent gleam in her inhuman eyes. "Its sway lays heavy on her soul. Its fingers are gripped around her heart. But she is fire made flesh and fire burns bright."

He doesn't bother to ask who she means. He doesn't bother to ask how she got in here. The Dothraki give her a wide berth, spitting about black magic. They won't try and stop her. Not expecting a useful answer, he asks for the thousandth time, "Do you see where she is?"

"She is where she belongs. She is coming for you." And as the relief blooms like a sudden balm down his leaden veins, she turns to pin him with those eyes. "And when she finds you, you must be prepared to do the hard task. You must—"

Visceral rage flares like an explosion, shattering the solemnity of his exhaustion, sparking him to life. A growl vibrating in his chest, he's across the room in an instant, grabbing at her arms, yanking her out of her seat, slamming her back against the stone wall. Hard enough to bruise, hard enough to rattle her bones. He bars an elbow across her throat to keep her there and points a finger in her face, warning darkly, "Tell me again, witch. Go on. Tell me to kill my wife."

There's a flicker of fear on her usually lifeless face, but her voice is placid. "To save the world from darkness. To spare it from a worse fate than the Long Night. That's what you are trying to do and I am telling you that this is the only way."

"You say it one more time and I'll burn you at the stake, like you did Princess Shireen, like you murdered all those innocent people before her."

"I'm merely the messenger."

Jon steps back, suddenly too exhausted again to bother with her mad ravings. "Maybe so, or maybe you're not listening, maybe you misunderstand your god. All I know is, if really that's what he wants… Aye, he can go fuck himself."

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"She must die … at his hands," a wicked witch whispers.

After Jon abandoned her in the meadow, she'd given up finding him again, at least here in her sleep. Dany walks through dreamscape on her own now, learning this new greater control over an old affinity. Prophecy dreams have always guided her, like the petrified eggs that lured her into a pyre to birth dragons, like the shadow of a wolf on a sandsilk tent as her baby died, like the Iron Throne buried in snow. But this is another whole dimension of the world opened up before her.

Daenerys returns to R'hllor's volcano, the city of the dead, the stone corpses, the ash. She walks its ancient ruins, left to the shadows, and she contemplates the myriad prophecies and historic legends. Doom of Valyria, Fall of Asshai, Fracture of Westeros, the Long Night of Winter. The end prophecy, a tale from Asshai.

On the dread night, when the world is gathered by darkness, a prince or princess that was promised will rise, bring death itself to its knees, and so will begin an eternal summer.

She walks along the water edge of the black Ash River and she remembers… She remembers, despite much effort to block it from her mind, the Lhazareen maegi she saved in the Great Grass Sea. The maegi that once cursed her, that had made her husband living death and killed her unborn child, that witch that had trained in Asshai.

If these Shadowlands and their patron lord are really the source of her power, if she was really born
to the God of Flame and Shadow, then Asshai has given her much, but it has also taken from her gravely. Unforgivably.

“We were given gifts,” the crone told her, “and we abused them.”

She’s come to believe that’s why Valyria was doomed.

Valyrian glory was built on the backs of slaves. The Targaryens were given a dream of prophecy, a warning from R’hllor before the Doom, and it saved them. But then they conquered the Seven Kingdoms and built their own House unto glory to follow in Old Valyria’s footsteps. They turned dragon against dragon and the cycle echoed. So once more, they were cursed. The dragons died out and the Targaryens devolved. They were given gifts that which they did not respect. Just as the First Men were given this beautiful earth to walk on, and they abused it, drained it, disrespected it, exploited its magic, drove out the Singers to extinction, too caught in their own selfish greed. That mistake brought on the new Long Night.

What had the maegi prophesied? What had been her cruel taunt? That Dany would never bear a living child, that her husband would never return to her, until…

Ah, yes. *The sun rises in the west and sets in the east. The seas go dry and the mountains blow in the wind like leaves.*

She’d prove the witch wrong once already. Jaehaerys is living proof, either that her prophecy was false or that her venomous lies were effective in stealing Dany’s hope for far too long. But was it all really false? After all, half the seas have dried to ice. Visions of the North flash before her eyes, reminding her of the winter winds blowing snow from the mountains, drifts lain hundred feet deep. Quakes that have broken the earth of them, crumbling them, mountain shards blowing away in the violent blizzards. The sun… *What has the sun done?* she wonders. But her womb has quickened to bear a perfect beautiful child and her husband has returned to her, the one she was meant to marry, the one she was made for, as he was made for her.

Thinking of the maegi who took Drogo and Rhaego from her only reminds Dany how treacherous it is to ever heed a witch’s words.

And then…

*“He is the true heir.”*

*“Aegon Targaryen.”*

*“The throne is his right, not yours, princess.”*

*“Step aside.”*

*“So long as she lives, you will never be safe, my king.”*

*“Kill the queen, command the dragons.”*

*“She must die. She is Dawn’s sacrifice.”*

*“You will kill your love, and your sword will alight, and the Great Other will fall, just as Azor Ahai did before you.”*

*“She is mad.”*
“She is mad.”

“Just like her father.”

“When a Targaryen is born, the gods flip a coin.”

“You’ve heard tales of what she’s done, crucified masters and charred captives. Essos burning. The Dragon Wrath of Braavos.”

“When my dragons are grown, we will lay waste to armies and burn cities to the ground!”

“You must end her, before she destroys us all.”

“The Mad Queen.”

A storm of voices pierce her ears, deafening and swirling, a thousand insidious echoes. Witches and high lords and Northmen and sisters and spies and Targaryen ghosts. Even her own voice assaults her. Dany slams her hands over her ears, fingers clenching at her hair, trying to muffle the pervasive chaos. But then it drowns out, a deafened ringing, and she peers across the burning world around her to see a crimson snake on the other side of the flames, staring back at her. The snake wraps itself around her white wolf and hisses in his ear before the wolf snarls.

“Don’t trust the dark flame,” Quaithe had warned, communicating through her glass candle.

Now Dany sees why. She thought she’d meant Kinvara, thought she was trying to turn her from her High Priestess counselor, but it was Melisandre in Westeros she spoke of. Melisandre who preached of bringing ice and fire together, who sought out Azor Ahai reborn, who burned sacrificial lambs on stakes in the name of her Lord of Light. Melisandre who seeks to turn Jon Snow against her.

My dearest enemy, my deadliest husband…

No! She shakes her head, staggers back from the flickers in the flame, shoving out at that darkly whispered insecurity at the deep traumatized recesses of her mind. No, she tells it. She will not be poisoned by paranoia and doubt. She will not falter in the faith or the trust or the love she holds in him. She will not let them turn her from him.

Jon is loyal. Jon loves her. Jon believes in her. Jon knows that she is good.

An easy path to darkness, a road full of strife to the light. She refuses to succumb. No matter how the insidiousness inside lures her astray.

“Show me,” she snarls the command, wresting control of her dreamscape once more after it had spiraled from her grasp. The world spins again, leaving behind the river and the shadows and the fire and the faint fragments of Jon’s surroundings. She finds herself ascending sandstone steps on a dark night, under a bright moon, a warmth in the air she hasn’t felt in years, not since she crossed west.

Within the Red Temple of Volantis, it is dimly lit and eerily hushed. Which is why the barest wisp of murmurs draws her through shadows to where a council of priests and priestesses contest.

“She believes the Silver is the one.”

“She swears the White Wolf can be swayed.”

“She asks for aid in her mission.”

“If the west falls, the ice will cross east shortly.”
“We must do whatever our Lord asks of us to help him with his cause.”

“She is not our Lord’s messenger. She is just another shadowbinder that has outlived herself.”

“Then we vote.”

“Yea to answer the shadowbinder’s request, nay to leave the Silver to her path.”

“Priestess Melisandre is a deluded fanatic,” someone interrupts, silencing the room before the vote can be cast, and Dany turns to glimpse Kinvara among the red cloaked silhouettes. “She’s spent so long staring into the flames, she hears her own voice and assumes our Lord. She’s lost all sense.”

“We vote.”

“We do not,” Kinvara declares, deadly steel in her tone. Her dark otherworldly eyes slide over each of them all, penetrating, warning. “No priest will interfere with Daenerys Stormborn’s fate.”

“There is a long road of temptation ahead of her,” another witch argues.

“Yet she will prevail.”

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His little sister, his spy. He’d promised himself she would never be his executioner, but she is determined to be his assassin, whether he lends permission or not. She jars him out of a burgeoning panic attack, appearing like a shadow in the corner, after he flees to his bed at the top of the Children’s Tower, blood still on his hands, even if the dagger is left behind. Maybe still stuck in that Stormlander…

Gods, he’s losing it.

Arya picks her way precisely through the debris he hasn’t bothered to clear away from the last assassination attempt. Speaking of, it takes him a moment to remind his racing addled brain that it is Arya coming towards him, pushing past the senseless fight or flight his body has been thrust into since the altercation in the south third causeway encampment. But when she notices his distress, she pulls off the mask of the man that tried to kill him, revealing her true face to him with a small solemn smile.

Her eyes tick down and she idly asks, “Whose blood?”

Jon starts scratching at his crusted knuckles again, moving to the bucket of water near his bed. He sits down, hunches tiredly over to try washing them clean. “Nobody’s.”

“Nobody’s?”

“Stormlands soldier.”

“Traitor?”

“No,” he replies. Gruffly. Eyes on his hands, on the blood in the water, expression darkening.

She lifts one eyebrow at him but doesn’t pursue her questioning. Instead, she moves away to the unshuttered window, spends a few moments scanning the revelry taking place below them, bonfires and music, drinking and dancing.

It was a good campaign into the bog today. They penned in a significantly sized horde that’d been
causing them trouble, razed it down. No Walkers, just their risen. Pretty pointless in the long run. But if they have to delude themselves to keep standing, then that’s what they’ll do. And any excuse for celebrating needs to be grabbed onto with both hands these days, despite how badly that rationale turned for them the day of the Silver Wedding.

Silver Wedding. He hates that they’ve coined it. Silver Wedding, Red Wedding. Marrying seems to be a catastrophic Stark curse, wrecking them and anyone within their radius. He hates that after everything, he and Dany didn’t even get one day. They weren’t even allowed one day. What does it take to earn a respite? Gods forbid peace.

“Jaime Lannister is being harbored at the Arbor,” his sister says suddenly, startling him out of his daze again. “With the blessing of House Redwyne.”

He’d forgotten she was there, behind him, at the window. She’s so still, so silent, and he’s so blinded by his own traitorous body as it betrays him. His heart thunders in his chest, a hammer in his head, his skin itching under the dead man’s blood. He’s sick with guilt, with the shame of snapping like that, losing his senses. And yet, he’s still burning with this aimless anger, this helplessness. Killing doesn’t help, but killing is what it causes nonetheless.

“Their fleet still answers to us,” Jon argues, swallowing hard when his voice is too broken, too hoarse. He feels hot. It’s fucking cold enough to freeze a man solid the second he steps away from the fire. Why is he sweating?

“For now,” she points out. “They’ll turn when the time is right. He may as well be in command of that fleet. And he wants more than a coup. He wants Dany to feel how he feels.”

He scrubs his hands up and down his face, heedless of the reddened water clinging to his callouses. He hunches deeper, rests his elbows on his knees. He’s so tired. “That’s why he went after me first. That’s why he wanted my throat slit.”

“I’ve gotten all I’m going to out of them,” she tells him, turning her back on the window and the firelight and incongruous playfulness below them. The way she’s peering at him, looking him over, peeling away layers, examining what she exposes, it’s unnerving. “My list is complete. Every Lannister loyalist within this camp at least. It’s time to eliminate them.”

This is what she does. This is what she’s good at. His sweet but wild sister, who’s been muted, all that spirit and energy buried away under a mask of dead men and a kill list. Rooting out the conspiracy that lingers around him, finding the conspirators, collecting intelligence, that’s one thing. Wearing a dead man’s face to play his spy, that’s one thing. But sending her out to slit all their throats in their sleep is something Jon can’t live with.

“Do it quietly,” he orders. Because none of this is anything he can live with.

“I will. The bodies won’t be found. I’ll send word to the Arbor that they were killed in battle, so they don’t suspect the plot has been found out. I’ll keep this face in circulation.”

“Arya…”

She’s already to the door as he falters, wavers, torn between resigned and resistant. She waits, her expression placid, patient but expectant.

“Someone else could do this part.”

“No,” she says, as he knew she would, as he’d hoped she wouldn’t, even though he realizes now that she’s the one best suited for this kind of work, however much that reality disturbs him. And as if
she’s read his mind, “It’s what I’m built for, brother.” Which wounds him, sharp and cold like a
dagger slid into the gut. She must see the wince of it on his face, because she offers a pitying smile
through the blankness. “I’m alright.”

*Built for.* She’s right. She has been built for this life. Not born, but built. He wonders if his little sister
Arya died across the Narrow Sea in Braavos, and some new strange creature returned in her place.
He wonders if Bran died Beyond the Wall, and the raven returned. Sansa… Where did she die? he
wonders. Was it King’s Landing? Or was it Winterfell under the tender grasp of Ramsay Bolton?
And Jon? Where did Jon Snow, Ned Stark’s son, their bastard brother, where did he die?

Once she’s gone, the silence in the room becomes more noticeable. Becomes uncomfortable. The
crackle of the fire, the cheer and chants and cries of the revelers below. *Life.* There is still so much
life here, all around him, even as the world becomes a graveyard. Even as his family remains
unreachable.

He didn’t mean to kill him. He really didn’t.

Even as those devoted to her begin to mourn, or hold stubbornly to their faith, the doubters are *angry*
at her absence. Angry at her, after she saved them, after she went missing trying to fend off her own
child for their sake.

“Face the truth,” the drunken Stormlander had sneered, jeering after him as Jon had pushed past and
intended to walk away. “Your Targaryen bitch is dead or she’s deserted us. Flown off for safer
lands. Either way, she’s never coming back.”

He meant to walk away. He was walking away.

But it echoed in his head, burning in his blood, gripping his heart in iron and squeezing. *Your
Targaryen bitch is dead. Your Targaryen bitch is dead. She’s never coming back.* He hadn’t meant
to kill him. He hadn’t even known that he’d swung back around, hadn’t known he’d surged across
the gap, hadn’t known he was killing him until the knife was already jammed in his throat, something
like a growl vibrating in Jon’s chest, his teeth gnashed and bared.

A man shouldn’t die for a few stupid words.

That’s not the kind of king he wants to be.

That’s not the kind of man he wants to be.

*Your Targaryen bitch is dead. She’s never coming back.*

+“I worry for the Wolf King,” Grey Worm admits, softly spoken in the quiet dark of their room in the
tower, just beneath Jon Snow’s. “The longer our queen is missing, the more he unravels.”

“Jon will be alright,” she asserts, pushing away any of her own doubt or stress on the matter. Pushing
away just how much of her days are spent watching the last leader they have left, her eyes following
him, her hand on his shoulder when he needs it, her tentative murmurs reminding him of what he
needs to be reminded of in those moments he seems so frayed.

He is her friend, and she worries over him for his sake, but it is her queen she owes it to, looking
after him, holding him together. Daenerys would do the same for her if she were in her place, if Grey
Worm was without her and needed his queen to care for him. Many might scoff at such a suggestion,
but she knows Daenerys Stormborn better than anyone else, and she knows she is right.
“I worry for him,” Grey Worm repeats, and she understands then that he isn’t thinking of Jon Snow’s wellbeing, but what all immensity depends on him not shattering, of him serving his purpose.

She rolls off her back, props a forearm across his chest, props her chin on her wrist, searching his stoic face, his furrowed brow, his dark beautiful eyes, so troubled, such quiet sadness, such soft shy yearning. Firming her tone, she tells him, “He is stronger than he knows. He will hold faith until she returns.” And then, with a rare impish smirk, she begins rising above him. “No more talk of kings and queens tonight.”

Grey Worm blinks in surprise, as if startled by her mood shift, by her playful boldness. For a split second, he is uncomfortable, uncertain of how to absorb it. “Missandei…” But then, as he always eventually does, her love warms up to her proposals and grows eager to follow her lead. Follow you anywhere, he’s promised more than once. Just as she would follow him.

It eats at her, not being able to keep at his side, forced to send him off and stay behind when he marches out to battle. She has plenty to do here, but as much as she’s unsuited for violence, she would prefer to keep him in her sight.

Which is why when he comes back after long days of warfare, even if she’s been busy and overworked in the command center, directing provision distributions, settling disputes, arranging camp movements, she’s always eagerly attentive. However tired they both are, she cannot collapse into bed beside him and sleep. She must strip him out of his armor, his leathers, his weapons. Must bare him to her anxious ministrations. She must wash him with gentle strokes of a sea sponge, water basins over the fire to warm the water. She must clean him of blood and muck and the reeking decay their enemy always taints them with. She must lay him down and trace her fingers over his body, the muscled planes and scar tissue, mapping him, memorizing him. Enjoying him, enjoying how she has the freedom now to touch him, to love him, to say whatever is on the tip of her tongue, whatever is in her heart, no need to hide or restrain any longer.

It is a ritual, every time they reunite, however briefly he was gone. She kisses all over him, slowly, sensually, while they speak in soft tones.

One day, she hopes, she believes, one day he won’t get that look in his eyes, that flicker of shame and discomfort and fear, that reluctance to allow her this which always surfaces before he folds it away again, deep down inside beneath his discipline and his desire.

She loves him fiercely. She hates that the masters cut him, mutilated him, took something so important from him, but she hates more that he should feel ashamed of that. Sometimes, she does wish they could make love as simply as other men and women do. It is the case that they must always be creative to give him the kind of ecstasy he brings her so effortlessly. But it is a brief longing, a fleeting disappointment, one that could never measure to the happiness and pleasure she finds with him here, just like this. She loves him exactly as he is. She hopes, she believes, that flicker in him won’t even be a flicker once enough time has passed. One day, she’ll have melted into him, against him, all over him enough so that he never feels the urge to hide from her again.

This night, while they lay together, limbs lazily entangled, his frequently troubled expression returns. It is an easier task now, in the aftermath of having thoroughly frenzied his senses, to pry the troubles out of him. At such prying, he uncertainly begins, “Missandei would make…”

“Yes?”

He licks his lips, searching. “Perfect?”

“Flawless, pure, excellent,” she expounds in Valyrian.
He nods. “Yes. All these.” His calloused fingers find her chin with a delicate touch as their eyes seem impossibly caught together. His voice goes lower, huskier, “Missandei would make all these … as a mother.”

She sits up off his chest in sudden surprise. “Mother?”

“I saw my Missandei’s eyes with the child in her arms. You want one.” He falters again. Pained, dragging out, “Missandei wants what I can never give her. What she deserves.”

Realization dawns in her.

Several nights ago, there was a revelry of survivors after another brutal battle in the bog. Drinking, dancing, trying to keep warm around the bonfires. She was playing with a babe, stolen from his tired mother, making faces and tickling and sharing giggles. She ended up cradling the infant in her arms as she swayed to the crude musicians, lost in reverie. When she looked up, he had been staring at her, something intense in his eyes, something smoldering. She smiled at him, beckoned him closer. As he crossed, she handed the babe back to its mother so she could take her love’s hand and coax him into dancing with her, slowly, savoring the night of relative peace, relative joy within the horror.

She smiles down at him now, wider than usual, with more unguarded love shining out than she would typically allow. She loves him. She thought she knew how much. But every day, she learns to love him a little more, a little deeper, in new ways. She touches her fingers to the top of his head then runs them down his face, lingering with her thumb hooked at his bottom lip, his chin cradled in her palm. She explains, “There is so much devastation. Even after we win this war and the ice melts… This world has no need of another new child. There are too many already here, alone and unloved. When this is over, when we find a home of peace… You are right. I would like to be a mother. I think I could be a good one. But our children are already here in the world somewhere. Waiting for us.”

“Missandei,” he sighs, still sounding pained, but a better kind of pained now.

She leans down and kisses him, languid but deep. As he arches up and wraps his arms around her, she speaks against his lips. “You will be a perfect father, flawless, excellent.” Then she laughs with her tongue still in his mouth when he rolls them over.

The newest reports have come in. Blackwater Bay has frozen solid. The Night King could march on Dragonstone. Where his son still hides, stranded now that the Narrow Sea is too treacherous to sail him east. Daenerys is still missing. Dragonstone hasn’t heard from her, hasn’t glimpsed her dragon. And where is Jon? What does Jon do? Jon sits here on his hands. In the Neck, holding fast at the panhandle, their last best hope to cut the Walkers off from the remnants of Westeros.

Winterfell refugees have fled from Riverrun to Highgarden, fleeing the harshest edges of winter. Led by Bran, who seeks use of the three weirwood heart trees still standing in their Godswood. Hopefully, with that resource, he might aid his brother in some of their increasingly more desperate quests. Maybe the trees will tell him what the Night King has planned. Maybe the trees will tell him where Dany has gone.

 Apparently, the ravens refuse.

Sansa had chosen to cross from Riverrun to King’s Landing some months prior. In the reports, he’s stunned to learn that she’s deserted there as well now. After a slurry of storms battered the capital, making it untenable to base any network out of, all but impossible passing through, she along with
Tyrion and company decided to take it upon themselves to sail to Essos, back to the Bay of Dragons.

It’s a strange thought, imagining Sansa in Meereen. Whatever reasoning propelled her and Dany’s Hand east is inexplicable to him, since they didn’t see fit to leave justification in their missives, but it’s the least of his worries. Though they chose not to explain themselves, they did reassure that an Ibbenese ship captain had taken them aboard before Blackwater had iced, well practiced in navigating arctic seas. Casso, Joth, and Assadora will see well to our safety, Tyrion wrote, as if those names should mean something to Jon.

Some of the earliest Stormborn Coalition sailors from the polar regions, Missandei informs him when he complains, distracting from his exasperated frustrations with an amusing tale of how Dany first convinced the roughneck Ibben islands nation to her Coalition, entirely by accident and misunderstanding, involving a ship of Ibben slaves newly freed and on return to the homeland before the wrong port in a storm nearly led to disaster.

The unlikely duo promise to search for Dany in the east, using the Stormborn network. Meanwhile, Arya has gone deep south to search for her, using her unique talents to get through the rebel blockaded Red Mountains pass to Dorne. Unsullied search the Westerlands, Dothraki scour the Stormlands. It’s all he can do. He can’t abandon the frontline. He has to make sure there’s still a world left when she comes home.

+ 

“Where are you, Dany? What are you doing out there?” he rasps into the night, not expecting an answer. It’s a question he’s asked a thousand times. There’s never an answer. Except…

“I find myself running with wolves,” she tells him, lips brushing at his ear as she appears behind him, pressing her body into his back, her palm sliding to rest over his heart. He clasps it there, trying to force her to linger. Linger instead of disappear, linger, not evaporate into the air like a ghost that was never there, as she always does these days, gone as soon as he glimpses her.

There’s a glimmer on the horizon, the suggestion of daylight just out of reach, just past the starry night that surrounds him.

Stretched out below his tower of ruins, the swamplands obscure themselves, fading into the mist, and a green valley takes their place. Softly rolling hills, green and green, the northern moors of his childhood.

Beyond the nearest ridge, he glimpses Jaeh playing in a patch of purple wildflowers. A boy bigger than he should be yet. And a smaller one chasing after him, a babe barely with her legs underneath her, the girl with wild silver curls in a yellow dress. A glimpse of them before they vanish, just enough to awaken a new kind of ferocity to his old quiet longing.

Throat tight, he white knuckles Dany’s fingers on his chest, asks, “Is that her?”

“It could be.”

“Do you think she knows?”

“What’s that?”

“Do you think she knows how much we will love her?”

“Do you think he remembers us?” Dany counters, and the helpless despair within him intensifies. Her lips brush his temple before she bows her head, resting her brow on the edge of his jaw. “Do
you think he will remember how much we loved him? That we’ve done all this for him, do you think
that will matter? Or will he feel we abandoned him?"

“We’re coming back.”

“Are we, Jon?”

The pressure of her body pulls back and her hand starts to slip from his grasp. He holds on, stubborn,
even a little angry at her, bruising her wrist to keep her from escaping. “Dany. Where are you? Tell
me where you’ve gone and I’ll come for you.”

Of all things, she sounds amused when she reminds him, “I’m running with wolves, my love.”

As soon as he dares to turn around, she’s gone again.

A dark tunnel, oppressive, suffocating, then a gate lifting slowly, and Daenerys walks out blindly
into the icy white, hand guarding her eyes as the light burns and the wind stings. Crossing the Wall
into the Lands of Always Winter. She spends eons staring up at the sky in amazement, just absorbing
the breathtaking sight, tendrils and waves of iridescent greens and violets dancing in the starry night
sky. Beneath the Curtain of Light, she makes the trek up the glacier, jagged black stone and blue ice.
Towards the mouth of the cave that awaits.

There’s a sound, something in the distance drawing her to it, some echo barely discernible under the
shrilling wind. Inside the cave, the world quietens.

A shadow lays a baby on the dragonglass altar at the heart of the cavernous depths, blanket falling
away from wriggling limbs. As the shadow recedes, Dany ventures forward, pulled inexorably closer
by its crying, even as the very essence of the altar viscerally repels her.

By the time she reaches it, the shadow is gone from the world and only the baby remains. The baby
with downy silver tufts of hair and a guttural cry. Her baby. She reaches out, ignoring the instincts
inside that try to make her recoil. She’s scared, haunted, but she wants her baby. She won’t abandon
her. She won’t turn and leave her here. She can’t. She can’t bear it. But when she strokes a finger
gently down her cheek, the infant’s blue eyes begin to glow, pale skin darkening and hardening,
becoming black with death, blue with ice, rigid with its unearthly shell.

“No,” Dany begs, staggering back from the altar, from what she’s done.

“I’ve been trying to make you listen for years now,” someone says, and a sharp pain lances through
her head.

She grips her temples, straining under it, but it lances and lances. Her vision is blurred by the burn of
it, barely making out the old man at the mouth of the cave. She blinks, a flicker of imagery, a raven
in his place, and then a man, and then a raven, and then a man again. He looks familiar.

“Bran? What are you doing here?”

“To change the future, one must find the past.”

“I don’t understand.” The pain is excruciating now. There’s a ringing in her ears. It feels as if her
skull is about to implode.

He ventures deeper into the cave, closing in on her, and the pain worsens with every step, driving her
to collapse against the stone wall, to scrabble along it half blind, circling to the other end of the altar, the farthest darkest end of the cave. Old Man Bran sounds idle and reflective when he says, “When I called out for my father at the Tower of Joy, he turned to search for the echo on the wind. I could have corrected our course then. The world would be unrecognizable.”

“Bran, stop. I can’t…”

“When the Great Other interrupted my vision quest, I caught myself between the past and the present. I called out for my protector to hold the door, and he heard me, in the present, in the past. I diverted his course irrevocably.”

“You’re talking about…”

“I called for you when your dragon fell from the sky, when you laid in the snow, when you waited for the mercy of the Night King. If you had let me in then, if you had not fought my call, we could have saved you from this now. We could have diverged from this path we must walk now.”

“I can’t…”

“The pain will recede once I leave you.”

She doesn’t think she can endure for that long. She doesn’t think she’ll survive it. And between them, the baby still cries.

With another flicker, the old man is gone.

The raven warns her not to face the Night King.

It doesn’t speak, so she’s not sure how it does this, but she knows in her bones, in the lancing pain that sears through her thoughts. She looks to her child, sacrificed on the altar of Ice and Death. When she turns back, the blackbird is Bran once more.

“How can I not? This is my destiny. This is what I was made for.”

“Not with that dragonglass shard in your heart.”

Burdens falling down again upon her shoulders, defeat crushing above her, she sinks slowly to her knees against the rock. The altar looms high, empty now, its blue-skinned baby’s cries nothing but a mournful echo on the blizzard wind. A wasteland of eternal winter around her, the very heart of darkness before her, the birthplace of Ice and Death in this world.

Dragonglass in her heart, sustaining her life, even as it struggles against the fire in her blood to take control, to change her, recreate her into the Night King’s mirror.

“If I destroy him, I’ll die with him?” she rasps. “Is my magic dependent on his now?”

“If you destroy him, you become him,” the raven vows.

“No.”

“And no one will be able to stop you.”

“You’re wrong,” she snarls.

“I’ve seen it.”
“I can beat it. This disease inside me, this magic, I can beat it. I’m stronger. It won’t control me.”

The raven is unwavering. “If you pull the glass from the Night King’s heart, his curse will be yours.”

“Then what do I do? How do I end this? How can I save them?” she implores, looking to the empty altar once more, feeling tears prick icily at her cheeks as she recalls the sight of her baby girl laid out bare on the glass and stone, abandoned, damned by her mother’s touch.

“Take a leap of faith.”

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