The Sword in the Darkness

by leilarran

Summary

"'Can a man still be brave if he's afraid?'
'That is the only time a man can be brave,' his father told him."

Kings rise, castles fall. Westeros crumbles into darkness.
It was still dark when he woke.

The ship was quiet in the way that only pre-dawn can be; the sounds of the ocean waves against the hull were muffled and quiet. He wasn’t much of a frequent sailor, but he had to admit that he enjoyed the comforting sway on calm seas. Sighing, he blinked the sleep from his eyes and used one hand to brush his hair away from his face. The window to the right of the bed revealed that the sky was as dark as midnight and the stars were still shining brightly. The sun would be up soon, but there was no going back to sleep for him now. The unfamiliarity of the room had startled him into alertness as he suddenly remembered where he was.

He turned his head and saw that Daenerys had remained close beside him as they slept, one arm draped across his chest. Her fingertips brushed against his skin with every breath he took. The furs only covered her from the waist down but she didn’t seem to be cold. She was still peacefully asleep, her face pure and relaxed. It was such a different face from the one she wore for others and he stared, memorizing it. There was no steel, no anger, no regal persona now, and he took several moments to enjoy the sight. Her hair trailed along the exposed skin of her back, the braids had come somewhat undone during the night.

Flashes of memory from the night played in his head. He had come to her room like a man possessed. When he knocked it was like he was watching another man approach her door, and when she invited him in he couldn’t think of a single word to say. All he wanted to do was be near her, hoping that she would feel the same.

The first touch of their lips had been a soft, tentative question, full of uncertainty, but soon he had her pressed up against the door, using one hand to slide the locking bolt closed and the other to caress whatever parts of her he could reach. She pushed him backwards with authority, directing him towards the bed, their clothes discarded and left on the floor as they went. The rest of the night was a haze of passion and the sound of her soft gasps in his ear as she clutched him tightly to her. He thought that every time he looked into her eyes he might lose himself in them.

It was a wonder how much one could say without actually speaking any words.

Jon reached over and moved a strand of silver-blonde away from her face. He tucked it securely behind her ear, letting his fingers linger against the soft skin of her face. He felt her turn into his hand in response. She was awake. Her eyes opened slowly to meet his gaze and he thought his heart might stop.

“Is it sunrise yet?” she asked him, shifting forward to place a soft kiss on his chest, and then another, tender and lingering.

“No, but it will be soon,” he responded as she continued, her lips leaving a trail of hot fire from his chest and up his neck, her hand running along his torso and pressing her body into him. “I should go back to my own cabin, before anyone notices I’m in here.” He wasn’t sure how well his presence in her cabin at such an inappropriate hour would be received by their companions and advisors, and he further wasn’t prepared to face the (presumably many) questions from Tyrion and Davos regarding his future intentions towards the Queen. He didn't have those answers himself, to be perfectly honest,
and at the moment he didn't want whatever was beginning between him and Daenerys to be affected by political maneuvering.

He felt a subtle but deliberate press of her hips into him and immediately changed his mind about going back to his own room. “I don’t want you to leave just yet, Jon Snow,” she murmured into his ear, and with that all thoughts of anything that might exist outside of that room were gone from his mind. He turned and kissed her, folding her into his arms and holding her close. His legs entwined with hers, her breasts pressed against him, and their lips came together as if the act of kissing was more essential than breathing. With a swift motion he rolled on top of her, and again the feel of her beneath him, her fingernails against the skin of his back, her quiet moans, became his entire world.

Some time later, they lay tangled together again, and he felt her fingers lightly tracing the outline of the scar over his heart. Aside from quietly asking him if they pained him at all — No, not anymore. — she hadn’t asked for details. He knew that she wanted to, and he hoped that he would be ready to tell her when she did. The memory still haunted and terrified him. The only person he’d talked to about it, aside from Davos, had been Sansa. She had been quietly horrified at the realization that had she arrived two days prior she would have been met by another dead brother. She simply hugged him tightly as she held her tears at bay, saying nothing.

He wondered what his sisters would think of Daenerys. Would they see her as he did, a Queen who would do whatever it took to insure the safety of her people? A ruler who thought not of her own power, but of making lives better for the people that followed her? He knew that Sansa wouldn’t be Sansa if she didn’t argue with him about it, and he valued that about her. And Arya - well, he didn’t know what Arya would think. Arya as a small child would be full of energetic questions for a descendant of the warrior queens she idolized, but it had been years since he had seen her. She was grown. She could be a stranger to him now for all he knew.

And Bran - he had been north of the Wall. Who knows what he must have endured, what he had seen.

After a moment, Daenerys raised herself up on her elbows and turned to look at him, the furs that covered her slipping off. Her skin glowed in the light of the one solitary candle still left burning.

“Where did you go?” she asked, noting that he was a bit lost in his own thoughts.

He met her gaze with a small smile. “Thinking of home,” he replied. “I’ve been away too long.”

She caressed the side of his face. “You’ll see them again soon,” she said, leaning forward and kissing him. “Come on deck and watch the sunrise with me,” she murmured against his lips.

“Or we could watch it from in here,” he said. Leaving the bed seemed like the worst idea in the world.

“You and I both know those windows are facing west,” she said, and she sat up, finally breaking skin contact with him for the first time since he showed up at her door earlier in the night.

He sighed good-naturedly and followed suit. They dressed with some reluctance, delayed only by not-so-brief pauses to kiss again, and also from having to locate missing items of his clothing. Many pieces had been tossed with exuberance when Daenerys had been consumed by the task of undressing him as quickly as possible.

When they made it to the door, she put her hand on the locking bolt and hesitated. “What happens when we open this door?” she asked, turning to him. “What do we tell the others?”
Jon reached down and took her hand in his, bringing it to his lips and placing a small kiss upon it. “I don’t know,” he replied honestly. “But we’ll handle it together.” He gave her hand a gentle squeeze of reassurance.

She smiled, and he reached behind her to push back the lock slowly. Daenerys cracked the door open to look in the hallway and then, seeing no one else, swung the door open and Jon followed her up to the deck.

Only two crew members were awake and neither paid Jon and the queen any mind except to nod a quick “ ‘Morning, your Grace” in their direction. Jon led her over to the east side of the ship, where the barest hint of light was starting to become visible on the horizon. They stood close together, leaning their forearms atop the railing to gaze out across the water.

*There’s no way we can hide this,* he thought, and he wasn’t sure if that bothered him or not.

They stood in companionable silence together, and after a minute or so Daenerys reached over and took his hand, twining their fingers together and moving closer so that their shoulders were touching. It was an intimate and comforting gesture, and it surprised him.

“Tell me about Winterfell,” she asked as the barest hint of light began to peer over the horizon.

“What do you want to know?”

She turned to face him. “Anything, really. Describe it. Tell me something about growing up there.” She paused. “I know I’ll see it for myself soon enough, but I want to imagine it through your eyes first.”

Jon was quiet for a moment, wondering where to start. After some more specific prompting from Daenerys, he began by describing it's round towers that soared into the sky, of the grand weirwood tree, of growing up with his siblings, of teaching Bran to shoot a bow, carting Arya and Rickon on his shoulders, and even one story of a prank he and Robb pulled on Theon when they were about twelve. That story in particular elicited a short burst of laughter from Daenerys, and Jon thought it might be one of the most lovely sounds in the world.

As the sun began to rise, the purples shifting to soft pinks and eventually yielding to yellow, others started to come up on deck; mostly crew members coming to adjust the sails and relieve the ones that had been posted up at night.

Tyrion was the first non-sailor to appear.

“You’re up early,” Daenerys noted as she turned to acknowledge his presence.

“I don’t sleep much on boats, your Grace,” he replied, acknowledging Daenerys with a bow of his head. “I trust you slept well.”

“I did indeed,” she said, her tone giving nothing away but Jon could have sworn he saw a glimmer of laughter in her eyes. Her Queen persona was back on again, but there was still some Daenerys shining through. “I was just having Jon entertain me with stories of Winterfell.”

Tyrion looked square at him now. Jon tried to keep his expression neutral but wasn't sure if he was managing it as well as Daenerys had. "With your hair down you almost look like the Jon Snow I used to know,” the dwarf said. “The young bastard of Winterfell on his way to the Night's Watch.”

“That was a long time ago,” Jon said.
There was a long moment of silence between the three of them, and Jon got the distinct impression that he was being scrutinized. He tried not to be annoyed by it. After a while, Daenerys regarded both of them and straightened, smoothing out her coat. “I’m going to go and find Missandei,” she said. “I will see you both when we gather for breakfast. If you’ll excuse me.”

Tyrion nodded in acknowledgment, and Jon tried not to stare after her as she walked away back down to the lower deck.

For a few quiet moments, Tyrion and Jon looked out over the water. “I’m not going to pretend that I think this is a good idea,” Tyrion said finally. Jon continued watching the waves and did not immediately respond. He could guess what Tyrion was going to say. “I saw you go into her room last night. And I can only assume things went as well as you expected, seeing as I find you both up here in better moods than one should reasonably be in at dawn.”

Jon turned to him. “Are you going to tell me stay away from her?” he asked calmly, cutting right to the point. He was not interested in dancing around the subject and just wanted to get on with it. He figured this would be the first of many conversations and so he might as well start getting them over with as soon as possible.

“I’m not sure anyone is able to keep the Queen from what she wants,” Tyrion replied carefully. “The fact that she came to Westeros with two armies at her back should be proof enough of that. But I will feel better if you and she at least pretend to take my advice on the matter.” Jon looked out towards the water again and nodded for him to continue. “It’s not that I don’t think you should be together; if that was the case I would have made an effort to discourage this.” Tyrion paused. “In fact, once I learned you were King in the North I thought a political marriage might be beneficial for the both of you.”

Jon kept his face straight ahead, but he would be lying to himself if he said he hadn’t thought along those same lines once or twice.

“However,” the dwarf continued. “It’s the timing I don’t like. We are on the cusp of two wars. You and I both know that love and war together end in tragedy more often than not. When people in power let personal feelings get in the way, people can die. I’ve seen it. Your brother Robb died for it. All of the evil things that my sister Cersei has done were out of a warped sense of it.” He paused. “And Daenerys’ love for you compelled her to go north, and we lost a dragon because of it.”

There was a sharp pain in Jon’s chest from the memory. The haunting cries of Viserion as he fell to the ice echoed in his nightmares as surely as it did for everyone else who’d heard it. Daenerys didn’t blame him, but he blamed himself. Clearly Tyrion blamed him too.

“You’re not like most men, Jon Snow,” Tyrion continued. “Even when we traveled to the Wall together I had a sense that there was something more to you than just a Night’s Watch recruit. I trust you. And I trust that you know what you’re doing.”

He watched the shadow of a dragon flying low in the far distance. “I appreciate your counsel,” Jon said finally, and sincerely meant it.

“You should tell Davos, if he doesn’t know already. Advisors are only as good as the facts they know, and this is a significant political alliance that neither side can afford to lose.”

“It won’t be lost on my end, regardless. I did give my word.”

“I know. It’s not your word I’m worried about. Daenerys still has to win over the rest of the Northern lords. If they turn their backs on you, then we may have to start securing alliances through other
means. Obviously an unmarried Queen is an attractive prospect to many people, and I’m sorry to say that a bastard, even Ned Stark’s bastard, can’t get us anything if he doesn’t have people willing to follow him.”

He knew Tyrion was right, as much as he hated to think about it. If the Northern lords turned against him he would have nothing to offer her and he would again just be Jon Snow, the Bastard of Winterfell, with no right to claim anything. The pain he felt in his chest at the thought of watching Daenerys marry another was shockingly fierce. He wanted her. He wanted her to be by his side until the end of their days and he wanted it more than anything. Marriage and children were both things he thought he could never have, and now that they could be within his grasp it was a dream he could not give up, not for anything.

“The Northern lords know what’s coming for us,” Jon said finally. “Once they see that she’s willing to fight for them they will support her claim.”

Tyrion looked at him, his expression unreadable. “I hope you’re right.”
Arya I

Chapter Summary

Arya and Sansa discuss their brother and the situation in the North.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Arya I

Arya tapped her fingers restlessly on the wood railing as she watched people in the courtyard below. It had finally stopped snowing after several days of miserable weather and people were shuffling through and clearing it out. Many were saying that this was supposed to be the longest and coldest winter that any of them had ever seen and she was starting to believe it, even with nothing to compare it to. This past summer had lasted through her entire life, and until now "winter" had always been something that was abstract; something that her father always talked about but she herself had never seen. It had snowed in Winterfell several times during her childhood, but it was usually quick to melt. Nothing at all like the thick snowstorm they had just endured.

Below her, two men entered the courtyard carrying a large crate. It was one of many that had arrived from Dragonstone in recent weeks, full of dragonglass from Jon with instructions to make as many weapons from it as they could. The smiths had already started making quick work of it all with piles of arrow tips, daggers, and spearheads now glittering darkly in the courtyard. Sansa said when the first crate arrived that Jon would be bringing more of it with him when he arrived with Daenerys Targaryen, and she hoped that the progress they had made would be enough.

Absentmindedly, Arya placed one hand on her sword hilt when she thought of her brother. The last time she had seen him was when he had given her the weapon, and as she thought about the memory it felt as if she was remembering someone else's life. So much had happened to them since then.

What would he think of me now? Would he be proud? Could we still be as close as we used to be?

Her fingers continued to tap on the wood in front of her, wishing desperately for something to do until the master-at-arms started drills again that afternoon. He had been giving basic sword instruction to a group of folks from Winter Town and a few of the inhabitants of the castle that had not had any formal training. Most of those he was teaching were girls about her own age, and she liked to participate as a sparring partner every once in awhile, even offering up some suggestions when she felt the traditional Northern way was somewhat lacking. The master-at-arms has been frequently annoyed by this but continued to let her interrupt, as she had proven many times in his practices that she knew a bit about what she was doing. She liked that Jon had ordered the women to be trained too - there was no sense in only having half your potential fighting force on the walls when you're trying to win a war.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Samwell Tarly pass behind her in his way to the stairs. “Are you off to see Bran then?” she asked him as he came near.

He nodded as he stopped to join her at the railing. “Yes, my Lady,” he said. “He has asked me to
accompany him to the Godswood again."

"Does it help?" she asked, genuinely curious. Since the evening of his arrival the two had spent many hours together, and as a result her younger brother seemed less lost in his own thoughts and more like the boy she used to know. Bran had even insisted that Sam and his family be treated as honored guests, and Sansa had been quick to comply. "Any friend of Jon's is welcome here," she had said.

Sam shrugged, but looked worried. "He said the weirwood helps him channel...whatever it is that he can do," he replied. "I'm mostly there to help him focus. Sometimes I write down what he sees."

"Do you understand it, this Three-Eyed Raven thing he does?" She found it hard to believe in visions and she told him so, despite Bran very obviously knowing things he shouldn't possibly have known. Littlefinger’s corpse flashed across her memory.

"To be quite honest, yes," he responded thoughtfully. "After everything Jon and I have seen, I have no real reason not to believe."

"How long has it been since you’ve seen him? Jon, I mean."

“It’s been more than a year I think,” he said, almost wistfully. “I will be happy to see him again, though I wish the circumstances were less dire.”

Just then, Sansa appeared from around the corner before Arya could press Sam for yet another story about Jon at the Wall, and her sister addressed the two of them as she approached.

“My Lady,” Sam acknowledged Sansa’s arrival with a slightly awkward bow of his head. “Gilly wanted me to thank you for the gift of the winter cloak for Little Sam,” he said. “It was very kind.”

When Sam had arrived at Winterfell, Arya had been surprised to learn that the woman and child who traveled with him were actually Wildlings from beyond the Wall, and the child that was named after him was not his own, despite the tenderness and care that he showed the little boy. What kind of man would spend his life to raise another man’s child with such compassion? She suspected cynically that there were few men left of such character in the world.

Sansa smiled. “It was no trouble,” she replied. “Please let me know if you need anything further.”

She turned to Arya. “I’ve been looking for you. Can we speak in private?”

Arya nodded in assent, bid a polite farewell to Sam as he continued on to Bran's quarters, and followed Sansa down the breezeway. Since the execution of Petyr Baelish, Sansa sometimes sought her out for conversation. Most of the time she would talk about issues with the day-to-day matters of keeping the castle running, mostly in an attempt to keep her thoughts in order and not necessarily because she desired Arya's counsel. She appreciated that Sansa did this. She knew that Littlefinger had nearly convinced her sister against her and Sansa did feel somewhat guilty about it. In return, Sansa consciously made an effort to include her (and to a lesser extent, Bran) in most decisions she made. They had suffered so much in the years since their father had died, and the fact that Littlefinger had almost succeeded in using that to tear them apart for good made their newfound closeness that much stronger.

Sansa led Arya into her father’s old study and shut the door. The strong wooden desk was covered in heavy parchment that contained detailed supply counts and other information relating to the running of a castle, as well as many curled raven scrolls from other Lords which were scattered on top. A large window behind the desk faced the Godswood, and she could see the tops of the trees swaying gently with the Northern wind. Her sister walked around the desk and sat in the large, high-backed
chair, looking every bit the Northern Lady she always wanted to be. Arya removed her sword and placed herself in the chair across from her, one leg propped up casually on the armrest.

“I received a raven from Jon,” Sansa said finally, handing a curled piece of parchment across the desk to her. “He’s landed in White Harbor.”

Arya quickly scanned the message, Jon’s utilitarian handwriting short and to the point. “According to the date on this then he should arrive in about five days if he is making good time.”

Sansa nodded. “That’s what I estimated as well.”

“Is this what you wanted to speak to me about? You didn't need to pull me in here for this.”

“That’s not all I wanted to say. I didn’t mention this to you before, but did you notice how he signed it? Warden of the North.”

“He’s bent the knee,” Arya said, trying not to let surprise color her voice.

“I found out with the last message he sent from Dragonstone. I haven’t told anyone else except for Littlefinger. I’m not sure how the Northern lords will take the news. I am already worried that Jon will return to a North in chaos without this added complication.”

“Well if he bent the knee he must have had a good reason,” Arya surmised, having a hard time imaging Jon as anything but practical. “He wouldn’t give the North to just anyone.”

“I want to agree with you - and I hope you’re right - but Jon is different than he was when you saw him last.” Arya noted that a look of pain momentarily crossed her sister's face, as if she were remembering something unpleasant. “Like ours, his road home has not been easy. I wish he hadn’t gone south.”

“He’ll be home soon,” Arya reminded her. “It's not like it was a wasted journey; he has accomplished everything you said that he left to do. Thanks to him, we have two armies, a Dragon Queen and an entire arsenal of dragonglass to help us fight the Others.”

“Yes, but at the cost of Northern independence?” Sansa asked. “I just don’t understand how he could give that up. Not after everything the North has suffered. Even our own father fought to overthrow the Targaryens, and here Jon is, bending the knee to the Mad King’s daughter.”

“I heard a lot of things about Daenerys Targaryen when I was in Braavos,” Arya replied. “Daenerys single-handedly ended the slave trade in Essos. All those who follow her do so not out of fear but because they choose to. That in itself suggests that she would be a better ruler than Cersei.”

“My horse would be a better ruler than Cersei.”

“I also heard that she can be ruthless to those that defy her.” She didn't need to elaborate; such acts were becoming common knowledge as Cersei's supporters had made great efforts to spread the rumors across Westeros. The complete destruction of the Lannister forces on Blackwater Rush currently Arya's favorite and she enjoyed each new iteration of the story she had heard. It reminded her of the Targaryen warrior queens that she had read about as a child.

“So which do you think Jon bent the knee to?” Sansa asked. "The queen who frees the slaves? Or the queen who brings fire and blood to her enemies?”

“Jon is not the type to be intimidated into submission; I don’t care how much you think he’s changed.”
Sansa paused, as if a thought suddenly occurred to her. “What if he was encouraged in another way? I have heard that Daenerys is beautiful.”

“You think the queen seduced him into bending the knee? That sounds even less likely than intimidation.”

“Littlefinger suggested that Jon might intend to marry her.”

Arya raised her eyebrows at this. “Do you think that’s likely? Or just more of Littlefinger’s lies?”

“I don’t know - the more I think about it, the more it makes sense. I can’t ignore the fact that such an alliance would be really good for the North. Especially if she somehow wins the throne from Cersei.”

“Of course it would be good for the North; a Stark would be King of the Seven Kingdoms,” Arya replied. “But is that something Jon wants?”

“I have no idea. He made no mention of it in any of his letters, and the only time he’s mentioned Daenerys is to tell me that she is accompanying him North to aid us in this war.” She sighed. “Communication is not his strength.”

“I guess we’ll just have to see when she arrives.”

“I’m worried that the Northern lords will abandon us because of her. We can’t get through this fight without them, and I fear that their hatred of the Targaryens will outweigh their sense of loyalty to us and to Jon.”

“Then we will survive without them,” Arya replied, perhaps a little too fiercely. Sansa told before of how the Northern lords had all abandoned her and Jon when they asked for help to take back Winterfell. Only the Mormonts had sent any men to their aid when called upon. The thought made her angry, and the fact that Sansa was worried they would still fail to honor their pledge to the Starks angered her even further. The execution of Baelish had done much to bring the Northern lords behind Sansa, but was it enough? If it came to it, would they choose Sansa over Jon? Would they abandon them if Sansa backed Jon’s decision to swear fealty to Daenerys?

“We can’t afford to be fractured now; not with Winter and war upon us.”

“Do you support Jon’s decision?”

Sansa took a long time to reply. “I do, yes,” she said finally. “I don’t know if I agree with it, but House Stark stands behind it’s own.”

The inclusion of Jon as part of House Stark was not lost on Arya. When they were children, Sansa had always been the quickest - after their mother - to remind him of the fact that he didn’t belong, and Arya knew how much it pained him. However, now Sansa only ever referred to Jon as if he were a trueborn brother, and that in itself spoke to how much her sister had changed.

“Winterfell is going to be crowded when they arrive,” Arya remarked, breaking the silence that had fallen between them. “Where are we going to put everyone?”

Sansa looked at her and sighed loudly; obviously that thought had crossed her mind as well. “Since I found out that Daenerys was coming North, I’ve had extra barracks constructed along the walls and in Winter Town,” she said. “But I’m not sure it will be enough. Building them has been slow work, and most of our ready supplies were used to repair the damage to the castle in the years since it was taken from us.”
“We could raid the Dreadfort for more supplies. Is it yours now that the Boltons are gone?”

Sansa smiled. “The Dreadfort is all but deserted. I have already sent men there to salvage what they
could. When the war is over I’m going to have it dismantled brick by brick.”

Arya felt a thrill of pride at this. She was about to respond when she was cut off by a sharp knock at
the door.

“It’s Sam Tarly and Bran, my Lady,” Sam’s voice sounded muffled through the heavy wooden door.

Arya stood up and opened the door for them. Sam was pushing her brother’s chair, and both wore
terrified looks on their faces as they entered the study. She was instantly tense.

“What happened?” Sansa asked, concern in her voice as Arya shut the door behind them. “What is
the matter? Did you see something?”

“The dead are coming,” Bran said without preamble. His normally neutral face wore a troubled
frown. ”The Night King has destroyed the Wall at Eastwatch.”

A cold lump formed in the pit of Arya’s stomach.

“Are you sure? How...how is that possible?” Sansa asked, trying to keep her voice steady.

“The Night King rides a dragon, one that breathes blue flame,” Bran replied. “He used it to breach
the Wall.”

“We need to warn the Umbers,” Arya said, breaking the tense silence that his words had brought.
“They are the closest to Eastwatch.”

"And Castle Black as well," Sam added. "They need to know."

Sansa made fearful eye contact with Arya for a brief moment, and then her eyes hardened into steel
as she snapped into action. Any hint of fear disappeared from her face and was replaced with strong
determination. “Sam, go and get Maester Wolkan, tell him we need to send ravens to all of the keeps
north of us immediately. Tell them to evacuate south to Winterfell as soon as possible. Send a raven
to Castle Black as well.” He nodded quickly and left. Sansa got up from her chair and moved around
the table to kneel beside Bran. She took his hand. “Bran, did you see anything else? Anything at
all?”

“That’s all I could see,” he murmured. “His powers are stronger. He can push me away.”

“We need to tell Jon,” Arya said, suddenly aware that she had picked up her sword from where she
had leaned it against Sansa's desk and her grip on Needle’s hilt was tight enough to leave a deep
imprint in the palm of her hand.

“How?” Sansa asked. “We don’t know exactly where he is on the Kingsroad. We'll have to wait for
him to get here.”

“He’s only a few days out, but an army can't travel the distance as fast as a single rider could.”

Sansa paused. “I don’t know a skilled enough rider that I can trust with this information. The last
thing we need is to start a panic.”

“Let me go,” Arya said. “I know the road and I can travel light. I can probably get to him in two
days if I push it. Jon will believe me and he will know what to do.”
Sansa seemed to hesitate. “I don’t - “

“You know it’s the best option,” Arya pressed. “If we wait for Jon to get here, then Last Hearth could be beyond saving. We need to tell him as soon as possible.”

She searched Arya’s face, her expression a mix of concern and something else. “You’re right, of course” her sister replied after a while, standing up and brushing dirt off her dress where she had been kneeling. “Jon is the military mind, not me. I can't do this without him. Please at least take someone with you.”

“I’ll travel faster on my own.”

“I don’t like the idea of you meeting a strange army by yourself.”

“Sansa, I have spent years traveling on my own. Jon will be there. Daenerys isn’t here to conquer the North. I’ll be fine.”

Sansa closed her eyes as if thinking hard about what she wanted to say. When she opened them she looked to the window. “It’s nearly midday,” she said finally. “You should leave now so that you can make some headway before dark.”

Arya let out the breath she had been holding and nodded, grateful that she didn’t have to argue further. She looked at Sansa and Bran in the study behind her. “I’m going to go grab my pack and some supplies,” she said to them. “Meet me in the courtyard in ten minutes.” With that, Arya turned and headed quickly to her room.

Her traveling bag was under her bed where she left it. She grabbed it hastily and threw in a spare wool tunic and leathers before heading down to the kitchens. Moving quickly, she made her way down the hall and hopped down the stairs two at a time, nearly knocking into one of the cooks as she took the sharp turn into the kitchens. Arya threw the door open and grabbed enough dried meat, bread, and cheese to last the journey, leaving the cook with a nod of thanks as she left.

Her next stop was the stables, and as she began to prepare her horse for the journey, she felt a cold nudge to one of her hands.

_Ghost._

She turned and came face to face with the red eyes of her brother’s direwolf. Ghost spent most of his time sleeping in the warmth of the stables when he wasn’t wandering the Godswood or following Sansa and Arya around. The direwolf had also taken a liking to being with Sam and his family on occasion, all of whom seemed happy to have the wolf in their company.

Arya reached out to run her fingers through Ghost’s thick white fur. She wished again that her own direwolf was with her. “I’m going to find Jon,” she whispered. “Will you come with me?” The wolf stared at her, but made no move to show that he could understand her. She scratched him behind the ears once more and then turned to lead her horse out of the stables.

Sansa and Bran were already waiting for her, and Arya gave each of them a tight hug. “I’ll be right back with our brother,” she said. “He’ll know what to do.”

“I think Ghost wants to go with you,” Sansa said, and she turned to see that the wolf had followed her out. “He misses Jon too.”

Arya fastened her traveling bag to the saddle and tightened her cloak around her before mounting the horse. Sansa handed the reins to her. “Please be careful,” her sister said. “We only just found each
other again.”

“I'll see you in a few days,” Arya replied, nudging her horse into a brisk trot out of the gate. Ghost followed behind.

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Chapter End Notes

what up y'all. thanks so much for all the nice comments on the previous chapter. it got way more attention than I thought it would and I'm glad you guys liked it.

We're back to Jon and Daenerys next.
Chapter Summary

Daenerys and Jon get some bad news.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Daenerys walked through a dense grove of trees, leaves crunching under her fur-lined leather boots. Their caravan on the Kingsroad had stopped for a midday rest and she had decided to take a walk to clear her mind, enjoying the feeling of solitude that the forest gave her. A warm breeze trickled through the branches and the leaves made a rustling sound that she found both comforting and familiar. She reached out and touched the closest tree, and the bark was rough even through her gloves.

Snow had not yet touched this area of the world, a fact she found a bit strange as their group had been traveling in snow for the better part of the past few days. The warmth caressed her skin and she relished it, a nice respite from the harsh and biting winds of winter, and she decided not to think too much about it and just enjoy the sensation. So she continued walking forward, the trees surrounding her with lush greens and browns. Soon she found herself in a beautiful, wide clearing.

The trees had changed. Now they all had white bark and leaves the color of blood. She had read about weirwood trees before, but this was the first time she was able to lay eyes on one. The clearing was surrounded by a ring of them, evenly spaced apart from each other in a perfect circle. They were beautiful to behold as they stood solidly and serenely along the edge of the open space; the descriptions of them that she had read had not done them justice. Each held such an immense presence that it was hard to believe that they were merely trees. They had to be something else as well, something that felt older than even the earth she stood upon. Daenerys walked forward towards the closest one, drawn to the image of a face carved deeply into the trunk. She reached out a hand to touch it, but as she walked forward it remained stubbornly out of reach. Strange.

What is this place?

“Daenerys.” She hears a voice behind her and spins around. It’s Jon. He was dressed in his usual leather gambeson, though it was much different than the one she was used to seeing. Curiously, she studied it, wondering why the nicer one he wore as King in the North was gone. This one was plain, utilitarian, and contained no sigils of his House. His usual cloak was different also - it had evidence of several mendings and other indications of hard use that she didn’t think had been there before. Why had he changed? And what happened to his cloak? He had the tired look of someone that had not slept well in days, weary and exhausted, as if he had lived an entire lifetime since she had left him on the road, only minutes ago. But how was that possible? What had happened?
Jon said her name again, and suddenly her concerns disappeared from her mind. All that mattered now was that he was here with her. Smiling broadly, she moved to go to him, her hands outstretched. It seemed to take her forever to get there, as though her feet were moving through thick mud, but she made it, grasping his hands firmly in hers and twining their fingers together. She tried to ask him about this place that she had found, but no words came out when she spoke, only silence. Jon looked down at her, his eyes full of warmth and love, and seemed not to notice that she had attempted to say anything.

Around them a voice echoed, “Who comes before the Old Gods this night?”

She looked around, but couldn’t find the speaker. It was just her and Jon and the weirwood trees.

“Daenerys of House Targaryen comes here to be wed,” another voice responds, one as familiar to her as her own voice, but for some reason she couldn’t think of who it belonged to. It, too, echoed around them as if from far away, and once more she saw that there was no one to be found. She felt a thrill at the words, but she and Jon had agreed, along with their advisors, that any formal discussion of such an arrangement should wait until they arrived at Winterfell. Her brow furrowed. Why the change of mind? Why had Jon agreed to marry her here, in a forest off the Kingsroad, instead of at home with his family?

Jon squeezed her hands in a reassuring gesture. She gazed up at him, feeling as if her heart would burst. He seemed not to share her concerns, and so she paid them no further mind. Nothing else in the world mattered to her except for Jon. He opened his mouth to speak, but she couldn’t hear him.

“I can’t hear you, my love,” she tries to say, but the words stick in her throat.

He speaks again. No sound is heard.

She leans forward, hoping that might help her catch the words, but the air around them suddenly dies. The warmth is gone, as if sucked from the very earth, and the world goes dark.

Daenerys looks about the clearing and sees the trees freezing before her very eyes. Terror grips her. Wide-eyed, she looks at Jon, urging him to move, to look around him and see that something was wrong. *We have to get back to the road,* she tries to implore, but his expression is still calm, gazing at her, as if he is unable to perceive the icy cold of death that reaches for them. She tries to move, but his hands still hold hers tightly and won’t release.

“Jon, we have to go!” she shouts, but still her voice is silent.

A scream then shatters the quiet around them, and the piercing sound of ice breaking follows. Every inch of her body is screaming at her to run, but she can’t. She tries to pull Jon with her again, but he is looking past her, his face now grim and afraid. She sees that his clothes again are different, and the bloody beginnings of another scar runs across his face. *When did that happen?* She whips her head around, looking in vain for Jon’s unseen attacker.

“Run, Daenerys!” he tells her. “Run!”

She can’t move even if she wanted to. She is locked in place by some force she can’t see. She tries to pull herself to Jon, but suddenly he is far on the other side of the clearing.

Behind him, a figure was holding a spear made of ice. Dread fills her soul.

They are too late.

She tries to cry out, to warn Jon of the danger, but still all that comes is silence. Tears sting her eyes
as she tries harder and harder to scream for him, but all he does is look at her, his expression full of pain and regret.

“Run!”

“I can’t!” she wants to scream. “I can’t!”

He finally turns to see the Night King coming for him, but not soon enough. He reaches for Longclaw and finds that it is not at his side. Daenerys watches helplessly as the Night King thrusts the spear forward, the point sliding through Jon’s chest as if he were made of paper.

She screams as he falls to his knees, gasping, the end of the weapon protruding out through his back and now a dark, gruesome red. Blood begins to stain the snow beneath him, and he falls.

Her name is the last word upon his lips. “Daenerys,” he whispers, the wind carrying the soft sound of his voice to her. His arm stretches out in her direction, fingers grabbing desperately at the snow until his face goes slack and his eyes stare past her, unseeing.

Pain rips her apart.

Snow covers the ground and swirls about her like a tempest, turning to ash in her hands. She sees the Night King advancing towards her, Jon’s blood dripping off the end of the spear he held and leaving a dark trail of death behind him.

As she looks up, all she sees are glowing blue eyes...and then nothing at all.

Daenerys woke abruptly with a gasp, sitting up fast and covered in a cold sweat. Her eyes were wide and her chest heaved as fear continued its hold on her body. The sight of the Night King coming towards her burned brightly in her mind. Her eyes adjusted to the dark silence of the tent and she tried to take deep breaths to calm herself.

It was just a dream.

She concentrated on her surroundings, her labored breathing the only sound in the darkness. It must still be early, as she heard no stirrings in the camp around her to signal that it would soon be time to continue their journey north. She closed her eyes, but was greeted again with the image of Jon’s death.

Her eyes snapped open immediately. There would be no use trying to sleep again, not with that waiting for her. She struggled to maintain her composure and her breaths still came in frantic heaves. It had felt so real, and the pain she had felt still courséd through her like knives in her blood.

Reaching to her left, she lit the small lantern that lay beside her. A low, flickering light filled her tent, banishing the shadows and bringing with it a small measure of warmth. She gathered herself and sat upright, letting out a sigh, watching as her breath fogged before her in the cool air.

After a moment, she stood and reached for the riding leathers she had laid on the traveling trunk at
her feet. Her hair cascaded in loose waves in front of her as she bent forward to pull on the black leather pants and fur-lined boots. She tucked the strands behind her ear as she tied the laces, her fingers stiff and trembling from both the lingering terror of the nightmare and the coldness of the air.

Once dressed, she carefully folded up her bedroll and furs and placed them into the trunk. Missandei usually did this for her, but since she was awake so early she figured she might as well save her friend the trouble. The task gave her something to concentrate on briefly as she tried to remember the specific way they needed to be folded in order for them to fit. It was an art form, she decided on the third time she had to unfold and refold a particularly odd shaped fur covering, trying to remember how Missandei had done it. On the fourth try she finally managed it, and after placing it on top of the others, she closed and latched the dark wood trunk with a heavy click.

She sat down on the top of it and picked up the lantern, holding it in her hands and absorbing the heat from it. It had to be a couple hours yet before dawn, but she didn’t want to stay here in the tent alone with her thoughts. She needed to walk, to do something to occupy her time. Missandei was in a tent next to her, but she felt terrible about waking her so early just so that she would have someone to speak to. Maybe if she just took a walk through the camp it would help clear her mind.

She set the lantern down on top of the trunk and stood up with another deep breath. Her heart rate seemed to be returning to normal, and her breathing had slowed. Her head brushed the thick fabric of the top of the tent as she did so, and she leaned down again to pick up a gray garment, folded neatly on top of a second trunk containing her clothes and other personal items. It was made of dark wool and lined with grey and white fur that draped along her neck and shoulders. Along the hem, a beautiful pattern of white stitching seemed to dance along the edges, obviously sewn by an expert hand. It was surely the warmest garment she owned and now one of her most treasured possessions.

It had been a gift from Jon upon their arrival at White Harbor several days ago, as he had insisted that only a cloak of Northern workmanship would truly protect her from the weather they would be journeying into. He had been right, she thought as she swung the garment around to place it upon her shoulders, crossing the leather straps over her chest and securing them in place. The day before they had seen a miserable combination of snow and sleet for most of the day and had it not been for his gift she would still most likely still be damp and cold.

She let the cloak fall about her and she absentmindedly fingered an embroidered edge, wishing that Jon was with her now. They had shared a bed every night on the ship from Dragonstone, but they had gone back to maintaining an appropriate distance since arriving in White Harbor. His absence pained her, and she wanted nothing more than to run to him, certain that his warm and comforting embrace was exactly what she needed to dispel the remaining sense of unease she felt. However, Jon had to go back to being the leader of the North, and Daenerys a foreign Queen. Sharing a bed together would only serve to sharpen the thorns of the current political situation between her armies and Jon’s people, especially since they had not entered into any formal understanding or betrothal. She had wanted to, of course, and had said as much, but Tyrion cautioned against such until they could get to Winterfell and gauge the Northern lords and their willingness to accept her claim. Jon had agreed to that advice, though it was with reluctance.

“Daenerys of House Targaryen comes her to be wed,” the voice from her dream echoed in her mind again. She never thought that she would ever feel excitement at the prospect of marriage, having resigned herself long ago that any marriage she would have would be one of political expediency and not one of love. The thought tugged at her heart as she imagined what it would be like to share her life with Jon in that way. It felt to her like they were two parts of the same whole; that Jon only made her better, that his presence gave her much needed clarity and strength.

To be completely honest with herself, at this point she wasn’t sure if she could even imagine ruling
the Seven Kingdoms without him at her side. She needed him, and she truly believed that the people needed him as well if they were to recover from the damage that had been done by the War of the Five Kings and, by extension, Cersei Lannister.

She sighed. The Iron Throne was a dream for another time. Now they had to concentrate on a greater threat.

“You have to see it to know.”

Daenerys suppressed a shudder. Much like tonight, the Army of the Dead had plagued her dreams since returning from beyond the Wall. Every night, thousands upon thousands of eerie blue eyes would stare back at her in the darkness. Every night, Viserion’s haunting cries as he fell from the sky echoed through her mind. It had been a horrible, gruesome sight, and she would never forget it for as long as she lived. The memory, which at first had filled her with a deep and bottomless sadness, now consumed her with such a burning rage that she half expected her clothes to turn to ash as she wore them. She was determined that they would not fall to that evil and its King who had taken her child from her. Not while she was here to stop it.

She shook her head slightly, as if the motion would dispel the thoughts that troubled her. She bent down and blew out the flame in her small lantern before moving forward and untangling the flaps of her tent, stepping through them into the cool air of early morning.

Two Unsullied stood guard outside her tent, both standing straight and still as she emerged. The moon shone brightly above them, reflecting off their armor and illuminating everything in a bright silver light. There was no hint of dawn on the horizon, but she didn’t think it would be too much longer now before the first light began to appear. The stars were bright and numerous and she stared up at them to take in their beauty. It looked like it would be a clear day, and the thought of blue skies after all of the grey clouds lifted her spirits.

Tents spread out before her as far as she could see. Her armies were camped in groups along the Kingsroad and the bright flickerings of small campfires dotted the blackness ahead. The only movement was the occasional rustling of horses or the shifting of sentries on duty. A chill breeze swept through their encampment and the gentle billowing sound of tens of thousands of tents accompanied it. She pulled her cloak tighter about her as it passed; the fur was soft and warm against the skin of her neck. Her boots crunched softly through the snow as she walked.

Up ahead, there was a group of several Northern style tents around a central fire. She approached, noticing the Stark direwolf emblazoned upon some of them. She was grateful to see that the sigil of House Manderly was not present; the Lord and his bannermen were accompanying them to Winterfell and had not exactly been pleased to welcome her to their shores. The Lord himself was polite, in a minimal sense, as he was old enough to remember the horrors her father had wrought and the consequences of the wars thereafter, and as such had no love for her or the name she bore. At a basic level she understood this, but it was frustrating to be judged entirely by the actions of a madman that she had never met.

Feet crunched in the snow behind her as she debated whether or not to walk towards the Northern tents, startling her out of her thoughts.

“You’re up early.” Jon appeared to her left, holding a mug of something warm in his hands. It was a relief to see him, whole and alive and smiling at her.
“I couldn’t sleep,” she responded, gesturing for her Unsullied guard who’d followed her to return back the way that they had come. “My dreams have been troubled of late.”

He sat down near the fire and motioned for her to join him. “I am sorry to hear that,” he murmured, and took her hand in his. The fire popped and crackled between them as they sat close together, sending a flurry of sparks into the sky. She watched the bright dots as they danced around each other for a brief moment before fading into the darkness.

Jon offered her the mug he was holding. She took a sip and discovered it to be a delicious warm cider.

“Thank you,” she said, handing it back. “It’s very sweet.”

“Lord Manderly brought some with him,” he replied. “Last time I had this was before I left for the Wall.”

“There’s no cider at Castle Black?” she asked, in jest.

He let out a small laugh. “No, nothing like it.”

Daenerys looped one arm in his as they sat there, enjoying the warmth of the fire. She had missed the feeling of being so near to him the past few days. He looked at her as their hands entwined, studying her face for a moment before reaching out slowly to tuck a wayward strand of hair behind her ear. His hand lingered on the side of her face before he pulled it back, reluctantly.

Her breath hitched in her chest. It was torture; to be so close and yet still separated. She leaned forward and turned his face to look at her. “Do you see anyone around?” she asked quietly.

“No.”

His eyes never left hers as he closed the distance between them, capturing her lips with a firm kiss that was all too brief. Her face followed his as he pulled away, not ready for the kiss to end. She made a small noise of disappointment.

The fire crackled again, sending more sparks into the sky. The air between them was heavy with tension and she saw his eyes flick to her lips and then back up to meet her gaze. She took the half empty mug of cider from his hands and set it down on the ground, slowly and deliberately.

His hand came up to her face again, fingers warm against the chill of the air. She closed her eyes as she concentrated on his touch, her body shivering from the sensation, the fire in her heart smoldering like a glowing ember. Softly, slowly, she felt his thumb brush against her lips and she parted them in response.

It had been six days since the last time they’d been alone together for any length of time. Her body yearned for him. His hand slid back to tangle in her hair and he pulled her forward again, their lips meeting with a sharp intake of breath. Her mind was beautifully, blissfully clear.

The sensation of teeth barely brushing her bottom lip caused her to let out a very quiet, involuntary moan and Jon pulled her closer in response; his arm snaking about her waist. There were too many layers clothes between them, and she briefly entertained the thought of having him take her into whichever tent was his so that they could start the process of removing them.

Unfortunately, there was no time for such things now. After several long moments they broke apart once more, but Jon still held her to him, eyes closed and resting his forehead upon hers.
“How much longer until dawn, do you think?” she asked him after a few moments had passed and their breathing had returned to normal.

Jon glanced up at the sky. “An hour, perhaps.”

“Everyone should be rising soon.”

“Aye,” he whispered, capturing her lips again, briefly but passionately. “We should probably behave ourselves.”

She smiled. “I suppose.”

He reached down to pick the mug of cider up again, offering it to her. The sweet drink was still warm. She looked at him, wanting to ask how it was made - as well as a great many other things - but was interrupted by the sound of boots in snow. She saw Jon’s eyes move from her to a point over her shoulder.

“Your Grace.”

She turned at the sound of the low Northern voice, and she smiled. “Ser Jorah,” she acknowledged. “What can I do for you at this hour?” She felt Jon lean away from her to put a more respectful distance between them, though he made no move to remove his hand from hers.

“The Dothraki have intercepted a rider in the north of the camp,” the knight explained, his eyes flicking down to their clasped hands for the briefest of moments. “A messenger from Winterfell.”

“Where is the rider now?” Daenerys asked, curious, dropping Jon’s hand and rising to her feet. Jon followed suit, but remained close.

Jorah gestured behind him, and two Dothraki came forward from around the side of one of the tents. They were escorting a woman, young, with dark brown hair and a serious expression. She heard a soft breath of recognition from Jon, and she turned to him. His face held a shocked expression, eyes wide as if he didn’t believe what he was seeing.

“Arya,” he whispered, and suddenly she understood.

There was a tense silence as Jon and his sister locked eyes. Arya tried to make a move to go to him, but was held back tightly by one of the Dothraki.

“Release her,” Daenerys commanded, and as soon as Arya was freed she ran to Jon and launched herself into his arms. Daenerys took a few steps back to give them some room, moving quietly over to Jorah’s side.

Watching the reunion tugged at her heart. Jon had told her that he hadn’t seen his youngest sister since he left for the Wall, almost seven years ago now, and that until receiving the message that she had returned to Winterfell he had even thought her to be dead. His eyes were shut tight as he continued to hold his sister, his face relieved, but shadowed with the pain of having to acknowledge how long they had been separated. She was a grown woman now, no longer the little girl that he had spoken of.

“The guards at your tent told Missandei you were here,” Jorah said to her quietly as they watched the reunion. “Perhaps it’s best not to go wandering the camp at night.”

“No harm will come to me,” she replied. “Not with Jon.” She understood where Jorah was coming from, but she was still irritated by his comment. She didn’t think that the feelings the knight once had
for her still remained, but he did seem to share the same misgivings Tyrion had about the development of her and Jon’s relationship, and she very much disagreed with the both of them.

“Perhaps I am concerned for you both,” the knight responded carefully. “Jon’s decision to bend the knee to you is not a popular one.”

“You think that he is in danger, here, surrounded by his own men?”

“I would feel better if you had an escort, your Grace.”

“I don’t want the Northerners to think I fear them.”

“I think insuring your safety is more impor-” Jorah trailed off in the middle of the word, a troubled expression crossing his face. Daenerys followed his gaze and noticed that Jon and Arya were now speaking together quietly, in urgent tones, and Jon’s face looked as though he had just been told someone had died.

After a moment, Jon looked up and met her eyes. Worry pooled like a knot in the pit of her stomach. “Tell me,” she demanded, trying to keep her voice level.

He placed a hand on Arya’s shoulder as they walked towards her, taking a deep breath before speaking.

“The Wall has fallen at Eastwatch,” he said. “The Army of the Dead is here.”

Daenerys felt as if she was hearing the words through a long tunnel. “What?” she asked, the knot of worry turning into full blown fear. Blue eyes invaded her mind and she felt a chill that had nothing to do with the weather. She swallowed, her throat dry, as she tried to keep the dead men in her thoughts at bay.

“How?” Jorah asked, seeming as if he couldn’t comprehend what he had heard.

Jon looked down at the ground, as if to steel himself. “The Night King rides a dragon,” he murmured, his eyes full of grief and regret as they met hers again.

A dragon.

She knew what those words meant. Not only had the Night King murdered her child, but he had adopted the remains for his own dark purposes. Grief tore at her heart, and for a brief moment it threatened to overwhelm her.

“Daenerys-” Jon took a step forward to comfort her, but she gestured for him to remain where he was as she blinked quickly to force away the tears. After a brief pause, she collected herself and stiffened as if she were suddenly made of steel, drawing strength from the fire that burned inside her. Now was not the time for grief.

Now was the time for anger.

Now was the time for strength.

She would not allow her child to be used for evil in this way.
A dragon is not a slave.

An angry determination welled up from her core, stoking the fire within her to a blazing inferno as she addressed Jorah and the Dothraki behind her.

“Gather the small council in my tent,” she demanded of them, practically spitting the words. “Now.”

Chapter End Notes

omg I am sooooooo sorry this took so long. I literally wrote and rewrote this chapter like ten times and just could not get it to say what I wanted it to say. Still not entirely happy with it, but if I got held up on perfectionism then I'd never post anything.

Also, no, I did not forget about Ghost and yes, there will be way more to the Jon and Arya reunion next chapter.
Jon II

Chapter Summary

Jon leads a small council meeting and begins to take steps to defend the North.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Jon II

“We need to send men to Last Hearth as soon as possible,” Jon said to the group gathered before him. He and Daenerys stood at the head of a simple table, an old and well-worn map of the Seven Kingdoms spread before them. Their advisors all wore varying degrees of the same grim expression as they stood around it, eyes focused on the North and the thick line that marked the Wall. They’d been quick to gather at Daenerys’ pre-dawn summons, and Jon had brought Davos and Lord Manderly with him as well. Arya stood to his left, next to Davos, which Jon found to be both a comfort and a distraction as she seemed to be both his sister and also a stranger occupying the same space. This was not the girl he remembered, but a shadow of her lingered still. He tried not to let the number of emotions he was feeling at her reappearance distract him from the problem at hand. He took a breath to steady himself before continuing. “And Karhold as well. They need to ride north today.”

The situation they faced now was one that Jon had only hoped to see in his nightmares. He’d hoped, foolishly perhaps, that Viserion had sunk too far into the frozen lake for the Night King to raise him. Or that the innate magic of the dragons themselves would prevent it from happening. Guilt still tore at him for having a hand in the sacrifice that Daenerys had made to save them beyond the Wall. She had assured him many times that she didn’t blame him or regret coming north to save them, that she needed to go to see the threat for her own eyes. Still, the guilt remained.

“Is that wise?” Tyrion asked. “A company of men isn’t going to stand a chance against a hundred thousand dead men.”

“I’m not sending them up there to fight,” he said. “I need them to evacuate everyone in the Night King’s path to Winterfell. I need them to take as much dragonglass as they can carry and arm every man, woman and child with it and send them south.”

“Do we know how long we have?” Jorah asked. The Northerner looked at the map in quiet contemplation.

“I...don’t know,” Jon replied. “If the Night King heads straight for Winterfell it could be a matter of a fortnight.” Anxious shifting swept through the group. “However, I don’t think he will do that. I think he will take his time. He will roll over the entire North and consume it. Women, children, farmers, Wildlings - there are near a thousand people between Eastwatch and Winterfell. Each one of them that falls is just another soldier we’ll have to face in the field.”

The group was silent as they considered this. It was a hard thing to plan against, knowing that every loss they suffered would just increase the number of enemies against them. They already didn’t have
the numbers to ensure victory. The biggest advantage they’d had was the dragons, and now even that one was lessened considerably.

“Will they make it to Last Hearth in time?” Davos asked.

Jon looked at the map for a moment to gather his thoughts. It was several days of hard riding from their position to the northernmost keep, but if Sansa’s warning made it in time, perhaps most of them would be out in front of the Dead before it’s too late.

“I don’t know,” Jon answered truthfully. “The best we can hope for is that they received Sansa’s raven and acted on it.”

“I could go,” Daenerys said. “Drogon could make it there in a matter of hours.”

“I think it’s best if we keep you and the dragons as far away from the Night King as possible,” Tyrion said before Jon could respond himself. “By your account he was able to take Viserion from you with no effort. We can’t lose you or a dragon before the real fight begins.”

“I know what I’m up against now,” Daenerys protested. “I could get them started south today, and we wouldn’t have to wait for men to ride up there. If the wall fell two days ago then they couldn’t have reached it yet.”

“The whole army, yes, but if Drogon can cross that distance in mere hours so can the Night King,” Jorah added.

Daenerys turned to Jon, eyes asking him to agree with her, but he couldn’t support the action she was suggesting. Not as an ally, not as the man who loved her and wanted to see her as far from harm as possible. It was too great a risk. He could feel everyone’s eyes on him, to see what he would say.

“What kind of a queen am I if I’m not willing to risk my life to fight them?”

Her own words echoed in his mind, uttered months ago on Dragonstone, about an entirely different set of problems. Something had changed for him when he’d heard that, a growing respect for her he’d harbored quietly deep within him. Something that grew and blossomed and consumed him over the days and weeks that followed. An emotion that he knew now to be love, though he felt that love was not a grand enough word to describe it. He’d loved before, and this was something else. Something more powerful, more all-encompassing than anything he had ever experienced.

“There’s no way we can protect you if you go up there alone,” Jon said after a moment, considering his words carefully. He tried to keep his voice neutral and his mind from running through all of the different scenarios in which Daenerys could be killed. “If you have to face the Night King you will do it only with a plan in mind and with all the force of our armies at your back.”

Out of the corner of his eye, he could see Tyrion almost visibly relax. Daenerys regarded him for a moment, then the fire in her eyes seemed to fade.

“If you go, and something goes wrong, we won’t be able to get enough men up there to support you,” he continued, eyes locking on to hers, imploring her silently to heed his advice. He knew that there was no way he could stop her if she’d made up her mind. All he could do was try and talk her out of it.
It's too dangerous, we can't lose you.

The brief moment in which he waited for her response seemed to last years, but she eventually nodded in agreement. “Alright,” she said decisively. “Then we’ll send men north. Who will go?”

“I’ll send a company of my men, your Grace,” Lord Manderly supplied, addressing both him and Daenerys. Jon had told the man he’d bent the knee when they’d arrived in White Harbor, but he still insisted on addressing him as a King. Daenerys didn’t seem to be bothered by it, and so the honorific remained. He’d given up on trying to correct him. “They know the North and can get there quickly.”

“Thank you, my Lord,” Jon replied, nodding towards the older man. “Go ahead and make the preparations, I’d like them to leave within the hour. And I’d like to speak to them before they leave.”

“Of course, your Grace.” The lord turned and departed swiftly from the command tent.

“Can you get a message to your sister?” Daenerys asked, turning to Tyrion. “They need to know what’s happened. If she plans on upholding her pledge to fight with us then they need to start moving north as soon as possible.”

Tyrion acknowledged her request with a nod, his gaze fixed on the small drawing that represented King’s Landing, seeming almost unable to take his eyes from it. “I’ll see to it now,” he murmured, and he too left the tent. Varys followed him.

“Your Grace,” Jorah began, addressing Daenerys. “I request to go north as well.” Jon looked up at the knight in surprise.

“Ser Jorah -”

“The North was my home once,” Jorah said, interrupting her. “I know it well. They need someone with them that knows what they face.”

Jon watched as Daenerys seemed to battle with a series of conflicting emotions, until her face settling into an expression of quiet resolve. “Of course, Ser Jorah,” she murmured after a moment.

The knight bowed his head to her, and then left the tent as the others had.

“Ser Davos, would you see to it that we are prepared to leave,” Jon asked his advisor. “The sooner we get moving, the better.”

“Aye, your Grace.”

“Take Arya with you,” he added. “I’ll follow shortly.” He turned to his sister, placing a hand on her shoulder like he’d done when she was a girl. “I’ll see you on the road, little sister.”

She smiled in response, but reluctantly followed Ser Davos out of the tent. Daenerys dismissed Greyworm and Missandei in much the same fashion.

As soon as they were alone, she sighed and leaned forward, her arms straight and hands pressed flat onto the top of the table, head bowed. It was the only sign of stress that she had shown since the small council had gathered.

“I can’t believe this,” she whispered to him. “It’s like something out of a nightmare.”
He laid a hand on hers, lacing their fingers together. He wished he could think of something comforting to say. That he was confident they would prevail. That they would save their people. That none of the people they cared about would be in danger.

If only saying them would make them true.

“I’d hoped we’d still have months to prepare,” he said. “That maybe we’d be able to hold them at Eastwatch. But now…” He trailed off, closing his eyes briefly in frustration and helplessness. “Now we don’t have time to plan a defense any farther north than Winterfell.”

She straightened and reached for his other hand, holding them both between them. “We will save your home, Jon,” she said, her voice steady and full of a confidence he wished he had. “I will not let it fall.”

He pulled her close, holding her tightly against him. He wished he could stay like that forever, holding her. Her skin was warm, her hair smelled of flowers. He could no longer imagine a life without her. “I love you,” he whispered.

She pulled back to look at him, a tender expression on her face. “And I love you, Jon Snow. We’ll get through this.”

He kissed her then, brief but lingering, before they made to depart the tent as well, only dropping her hand when they stepped out into the sunrise. Their encampment seemed nearly dismantled and Daenerys’ horse was there waiting for her.

Quickly, Jon made his way back alone through the controlled chaos of men and horses around him, arriving back to the cluster of Northern men and horses as they prepared to leave, helping to load horsecarts and extinguish cooking fires. He was glad to have the tasks to focus on, so he could clear his mind and keep his thoughts straight.

“Your Grace,” Lord Manderly spoke, riding up to him a short while later as Jon had begun readying his own horse. “They are ready to depart north.”

Jon nodded in acknowledgement and mounted his horse to follow him. The company had assembled themselves just off the Kingsroad, a group of nearly a hundred men mounted and set with grim expressions. Jorah rode up as Jon was speaking to the captain, and Daenerys rode behind him, the hood of her cloak now pulled up and pinned in place. She only had eyes for Ser Jorah, who seemed determined not to meet them. To his surprise, the Hound followed behind them both.

“Jorah told me,” the man said gruffly and without preamble as he directed his horse up next to him. “I’ll go too.”

“Remember you’re not up there to engage,” Jon reminded the group as the two men joined them. “Travel light and fast. If you see any sign of the enemy you mark the location and head straight back to Winterfell. We need to know where the enemy is and how fast they are moving.” Jon turned to Lord Manderly’s captain, a man about ten years Jon’s senior with hints of grey in his dark beard. “These men have been north of the Wall before and have fought the dead,” he said, gesturing to Jorah and the Hound. “Rely on them and keep their counsel in this. I would see you all returned.”

The man nodded. “Of course, your Grace.”

Jon shifted in his saddle as he watched the company of ride ride off with Lord Manderly on his right and Daenerys on his left. None of them spoke for some time as the sun rose, watching them fade into
the distance ahead of them. Soon, the rest of their armies had begun to march north, filing past the	hree of them in a steady stream of men, horses, and carts of supplies.

Lord Manderly was first to join the lines, riding forth to regroup with the remainder of his men as they filed past.

“Ser Jorah keeps leaving me,” Daenerys remarked after a moment. “I banished him from my side twice, and now he’s left me twice.” He could hear the sadness in her voice as she spoke. “He was there when I was sold to the Dothraki, and for years he was my only connection to Westeros at all.”

“He will return to you again,” he said, hoping the words were true.

Daenerys turned to him, a slight smile only barely discernible. “I appreciate your optimism.”

They watched her armies pass in silence, listening to the sounds of horses and footsteps crunching in the snow. The sun was nearly fully risen and the sky was clear. It would be an easy day of riding and they would be able to make good time. He hoped to be at Winterfell the day after next. He missed his home. He’d been away for too long.

After some time, Davos and Arya rode up next to them. Tyrion joined them thereafter, though he stood just in front of Daenerys and was not mounted upon a horse. “Everyone should be on the move, your Grace,” Davos said to Jon.

“Good,” he replied. “Manderly’s men set off just before sunrise.”

“Do you think the people will heed their warnings?” Tyrion asked.

Jon sighed. “We can only hope that they do,” he replied. “It’s up to them now.”

“Jorah will see it done,” Daenerys said.

“Jorah went with them?” Tyrion seemed both surprised and not.

She nodded. “He volunteered to go after you left.”

“The Hound as well,” Jon added. Arya turned sharply in response to this.

“The Hound is with you?” she asked incredulously. “He’s alive?”

“We found him at Eastwatch,” Jon replied, shrugging. “He helped us capture a wight and bring it to Cersei.”

Arya seemed amazed at the information. “And he takes your orders now? He’s declared for the North?”

“I don’t think the Hound declares for anybody,” he said. The Hound had taken it upon himself to make sure the wight they captured made it to King’s Landing, and after that Jon had asked him to head for Winterfell with them from Dragonstone. He’s a good fighter and we could use him.

He had known that she and the Hound had traveled together before, so her questions had not been a surprise. Brienne had told him that she had seen Arya and had fought the Hound in an effort to bring her to safety, but that his sister had refused to go with her and fled. Jon had held onto that scrap of news tightly in the months since and barely dared to hope that he would see Arya again. He’d thought her dead in King’s Landing years before. When he retook Winterfell, he’d hoped that the news of such would reach her, wherever she was, and that it would encourage her to return home.
His hope slowly dwindled in the weeks and months that had passed since and they’d not heard word from her at all.

Now here she was, at his side, no longer a girl of eleven but a woman grown. Her hair was shorter, her face was less expressive, and she seemed less curious about the world. The years on her own had changed her.

_We’re all different now._

Groups of Unsullied men began to pass them as the group continued to look on, marching in nearly perfect unison, the dark armor contrasting deeply with the snow around them.

“Is it true the Unsullied aren’t afraid of anything?” Arya asked, watching the army with curious eyes. She looked to Jon for the answer, but he turned to look at Daenerys, who regarded his sister with an amused expression.

“The Unsullied know fear, just as all men do,” she replied. “But they are trained young to face the terrors of war, and therefore things that would cause most men to flee do not affect them the same.”

Arya seemed to want to ask further questions, but she was interrupted as a lumbering horsecart stopped near them. Varys and Missandei were seated in front.

“Looks like my ride is here,” Tyrion quipped as he walked up to it, taking a proffered hand from Varys and seating himself beside the eunuch.

“Shall we press on as well?” Daenerys asked, directing the question at Jon. He gestured for her to lead the way and the four of them brought their horses about to join the column headed north.

Later that night, Jon found himself near the fire, sitting on the ground and leaning against a trunk full of dragonglass. One arm resting atop a bent knee, the other leg straight out. He was consumed with the news that Arya had brought earlier that day and unable to shake the uneasy knot of worry and guilt that had taken hold. It had been easy to keep at bay before with the distraction of conversation along the road, but now he was alone and there was nothing to keep the thoughts from his mind.

He’d spent most of the day speaking with Arya, learning of her journey and all that had happened to her. He could tell that she was leaving a lot of things out, especially about her time in Braavos, but felt no need in pressing her for further details. It was enough for him to know that she was safe and whole. It was the stories she had of King’s Landing that interested him the most. She told him of how their father had discovered Needle in her chambers shortly after they’d arrived, and instead of taking it from her he provided her with lessons.

Perhaps what he took most to heart was the fact that Arya still carried Needle with her. He’d recognized it as soon as he saw it on her hip, and how could he not? He’d spent hour upon hour in the forge with the Winterfell blacksmith, wanting to get the design and size just right. He knew that sword almost as well as his own.

Aside from her own journey, Arya had also apprised him and Davos of the situation in Winterfell. She informed him of steps Sansa had taken to prepare for winter and the war, as well as the events that unfolded leading to Littlefinger’s trial and execution. Jon couldn’t really find it in him to be
anything less than relieved at that particular piece of information. He was of the opinion that the world was better without Petyr Baelish in it, and he hoped that any political maneuverings by the man had dissolved soon after. Tyrion and Varys had been interested in the news of Littlefinger’s death as well, both to varying degrees. Tyrion appeared impressed that it had been Sansa to give the order, and Varys seemed contemplative but just as unreadable as usual.

When they’d stopped for a midday rest, Arya had taken him off to the side and told him the full truth about Bran and his abilities. The Three-Eyed Raven he was calling himself now, she said. A greenseer. He pressed her for details about it, but Arya wasn’t able to give him many answers.

“You’ll have to talk to him,” she’d said. “Maybe he’ll be more inclined to give you answers. He won’t talk about it with me and Sansa. He doesn’t talk much at all, actually.”

The implications of Bran’s greenseer power could be great. The stories said that a greenseer was born to humans only one in every thousand thousands. If he could truly see events as they unfolded, then that could give them a significant advantage in the wars to come. A spy in the enemy camp without the risk of life? It was something any commander would dream of, though if the wrong people found out about it, Bran’s life would be in serious danger.

The fire crackled and popped in front of him, and his eyes focused on it, staring at the bright orange glow of the wood at the center. His mind wandered to thoughts of the witch Melisandre, and how she had often spoken of seeing visions in the flames, messages and prophecies from the Lord of Light. Thoros had spoken of it also as they journeyed beyond the Wall, and even the Hound claimed to have seen the same arrowhead mountain they had reached despite having never journeyed north of the Wall before. Jon stared for a long moment, but there was nothing.

All he could see was ash.

He sighed in frustration. If he was alive because the Lord of Light willed it, as Melisandre had claimed, then why? Why bring him back when he himself was not a follower of that same god? He had thought himself a follower of the Old Gods his entire life, like his father, but since his death he’d not felt compelled by them at all. He’d not gone to the Godswood once since retaking Winterfell.

He had died, and there was nothing waiting for him there but darkness. No Old Gods, no Lord of Light, no trace of the Faith of the Seven so worshipped by most of Westeros. Nothing.

In a way, he found that fact to be more comforting than the alternative. If the gods didn’t exist, then he didn’t need to concern himself with living his life within their confines. When his time comes again he could die knowing that his life wasn’t given in the service of some god, but in the service of his family, his home, his people.

And that would be enough.

Chapter End Notes

hey so I hope you guys didn't forget about me. I swear I didn't forget about this! I've had a hectic couple of months and didn't really have much time to write. Life appears to be
settling down a bit though, so that's good for me. More time to work on this story!

Let me know what you think/suggestions/questions, etc. I'm always looking for ways to improve. Thank you for reading.

p.s. no, still didn't forget about Ghost. He'll be around next chapter. I've already written most of it.
Sansa I

Chapter Summary

In which Sansa has a number of conversations.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Sansa I

Sansa tapped her fingers across the top of the long wooden table, cascading them one after another in rapid succession. They thumped with a dull echo, small in the cavernous silence of the Great Hall. Jon sat across from her and was waiting for her to speak, fingerling the handle of his half empty mug of ale almost absentmindedly.

Her brother had arrived at Winterfell earlier that day to a subdued - but relieved - welcome. It had started snowing rather heavily that morning, with no signs of letting up, so his return was less the formal affair it would have typically been and more of a hasty greeting followed by a rush to get indoors. It was probably better that way. Not that she expected there to be trouble, but in the years since the last southern monarch visited the North she had learned to expect the worst possible outcome.

So, she had decided to forego a large welcoming dinner and opted instead for a smaller affair with just the family, satisfying the tradition and niceties expected. A simple meal of a hearty stew, bread, and ale. A part of her wished she could have arranged for something grander to impress the visiting monarch, but she couldn’t in good conscience sacrifice the extra supplies it would require.

Feasts were a luxury that would have to wait until spring came again.

Jon seemed to relax a bit once he realized that he would not have to immediately defend himself to his lords; she had sent the ones who had already arrived out on excursions elsewhere to avoid such a confrontation. Bronze Yohn Royce and some of his Knights of the Vale journeyed to the Dreadfort to aid in the recovery of any useful supplies or weapons, as well as to usher any remaining smallfolk in the area to Winterfell. Lord Glover and his ward, Larence Snow, had been sent to Hornwood for the same purpose, as the castle and surrounding lands had seen no proper lord since both Halys Hornwood and his son died in the service of her brother Robb, and Lady Hornwood had been killed by Ramsey during his tyrannical grasp for power in the North. She expected them both back in the next day or so. She’d heard word from all of the others that they should be arriving about that time as well. All except for Lord Umber in Last Hearth.

Jon had been worried at this news. Not only was Ned Umber only just a year and ten, he was also the closest keep to Eastwatch and the threat that marched upon them. She had been relieved to hear that Jon had sent men up there as soon as Arya had given him her message, but still she had received no raven from them, and Bran could not see them despite long hours in the Godswood. Her younger brother said that his gift was growing stronger, but that the Night King had similar...abilities and also seemed to have the power to avoid detection from the same.
To be honest, the whole thing drove her mad with anxiety. Armies of dead soldiers, greenseers, dragons...and Dragon Queens. It almost made her wish for the days when the political conspiracy of King’s Landing was all she had to worry about.

“You wanted to talk?” Jon asked pointedly, breaking the silence that had stretched on between them while she was lost in her own thoughts.

“I did.” she replied. “I do.” Now that she was about to get the conversation she had wanted for weeks, she was having a difficult time finding the words to begin. She told him as much.

“Just say what’s on your mind,” he urged, though patiently.

“You and the Queen seem to get along,” she started. It was a poor introduction to her thoughts, but it would at least get the conversation started.

Jon raised an eyebrow. “I spent months on her island.” His tone indicating that he wasn’t sure what her point was. “This wasn’t the first time we’ve had a meal together.”

“I hope the rest of the Northern lords take to her as eagerly as you and Arya seem to have done.” It was a bit more accusatory than she intended, but she did not take steps to amend it.

Frustration flashed in a quick wave across Jon’s face in reaction. “Yes, well, we don’t have time for them to do otherwise,” he replied, curtly. “I know it’s a lot to ask, but with the Night King south of the Wall I have no interest in entertaining political whinging.”

She sighed. She rather thought that the lords only half believed Jon at all; following his orders about preparation and defense simply because he was the king and not because they actually feared the threat. She got the impression while Jon had been away that most thought of the Night King and his Army to be just another branch of Wildlings, and that Jon had just been taken in by Night’s Watch superstition during his years at the Wall. Then again, she had taken Jon at his word when he first told her of them, but to be honest she hadn’t *really* believed until Brienne returned from King’s Landing and told her of the dead soldier she saw at the Dragonpit.

Since then the gnawing, anxious pit of worry in her stomach refused to leave. She’d sent the Lords away on their tasks that very day; suddenly fearing that she had not done enough to prepare.

Unfortunately, her belief in Jon would do little - if anything - to sway the Lords in his favor, and until the threat was on their doorstep she feared they would stubbornly hold their prejudices in the forefront.

“What did you expect?” she asked, voicing her concerns. “For them to just lie down and accept rule by the same family they lost fathers and sons to overthrow? They’re a bunch of stubborn fools, but I have a hard time blaming them for holding the grudge.”

“Daenerys Targaryen is not her father,” he said, frustrated. “I should think that fact is obvious given that she’s here, helping us. That she hasn’t burned half of Westeros to its foundation stones. Because of her the North won’t lose the few sons and daughters it has left.”

“But did it have to come at the cost of Northern independence?” Sansa asked, pleading. “Couldn’t there have been some other way?” *What kind of man willingly gives up being a king?*

“I didn’t just hand the North to her because she *asked,*” Jon snapped. “Though as far as I’m concerned it is a small price to pay to insure our survival. I pledged my loyalty to her because she earned it, because she’s *here.*” He sighed heavily. “She’s a good Queen,” he continued, quietly. “She has a good heart and cares about the people.”
“Lots of people have good hearts,” she said tartly, finding his reply a bit naïve. “Doesn’t mean they should rule.” Her brother eyed her across the table, eyes steely grey and focused. “You may have Lord Manderly on your side now, but I’m afraid you’ll not find the rest of the lords so easily persuaded.” *And I among them.*

“I did not consider Lord Manderly to be an easy persuasion.”

“Compared to what you’ll be facing in a few days, I might! You’ve been gone for months and I’ve been the one listening to them all this time.” *And keeping Winterfell running. And maintaining our grain stores. And finding places for the Queen, her counsel, and her armies.* She sighed. “None of them were happy about your departure. Littlefinger did the best he could to stir discontent in favor of unnaming you as King.”

“I’m not surprised,” he said darkly.

“I also heard talk comparing you to Robb,” she continued, more delicately this time. “That you’re another King fallen under the spell of a foreigner.” *That you sold the North for lies and empty promises.* None of that had been spoken directly to her, of course, or perhaps more than one execution would have taken place in Jon’s absence.

Jon’s eyes flashed in anger. “I am not Robb,” he said. “I am not promised to anyone and I have not married Daenerys.”

The way he said her name was of interested to her. *Daenerys.* Informal. Easy. Like he’d referred to her as such so often it was a habit. The suggestion that Jon may want to marry her didn’t seem as far-fetched a theory now as she’d initially realized. And there was no denying that the Queen was beautiful; Jon would have to be a blind fool not to have noticed.

*“Together they would be difficult to defeat.”*

“Do you intend to?” she asked, brow furrowed. She’d not really given credence to the possibility that he’d be interested, even when Littlefinger had brought it up.

He regarded her for several moments before answering. “There’s not really time for such things right now,” he said finally, deliberately avoiding a direct answer.

She had to keep from rolling her eyes. “I disagree.”

“Of course you do.”

“Listen, Jon. I’m not talking about some silly romantic notion of marriage right now,” she said, ignoring his attempt to object. “It would make the alliance permanent and unquestionable. The North will not want to risk their lives to put another Targaryen on the throne, no matter how unlike her father she is. I’m sure that thought has occurred to you already.” She paused, but he simply waited for her to get to her point. “However…” she continued, leaning forward. “They *would* march south if it meant the son of Ned Stark would be King.”

Her words hung in the air between them.

“I don’t want the Iron Throne,” he said sharply in response. The reaction was strong and visceral.
“You didn’t want to be King in the North either,” she snapped back, annoyed. “But you are, and you’re good at it.”

“Am I? Weren’t you just mentioning how easy it was for Littlefinger to turn them against me?”

“You are a good king,” she insisted. “I wouldn’t be suggesting you become King of the Seven Kingdoms if you weren’t.”

Jon was silent for a while, running his thumb across the handle of his mug as he considered her words. He seemed a bit put off by her phrasing, as if he’d not considered himself a king of anything really until she’d said the words aloud. “We can talk about this all you want,” he said after a moment. “But Daenerys would still have to agree. Why should she marry me if I’ve already pledged the North to her?”

“She doesn’t have the North. Not yet,” Sansa pointed out. “All she has right now is House Stark, and you know the North has turned their backs on us before.” A dark look crossed his face at the shared memory. “Honestly, I’m surprised Tyrion hasn’t brought up marriage to you already.”

“Advisors aren’t in the habit of suggesting their Queens marry bastards.”

“Bastards aren’t usually named King in the North either, yet here you are. Legitimize yourself if that’s a concern. I’m surprised you haven’t done so.”

He sighed. “I’d be lying if I said I hadn’t thought about it,” he replied. “I begged Father for it enough.”

“So, do it then.”

He met her eyes. “I can’t,” he murmured, sounding both sad and resigned, as if he’d made up his mind long ago. “At this point it would just seem like a lie. I’m not a Stark, never will be, and I made my peace with that before I even went to the Wall.”

It seemed to Sansa that he was being unnecessarily stubborn about it. If he were a legitimate Stark then I would certainly tie up any objections as to who the Lord of Winterfell should be. Some thought it should be Bran. Some thought it should be her. These days it seemed as if only she and Arya were the only ones who thought it should be Jon.

“It’s up to you,” she conceded finally, dropping it for now. “If she agrees to marriage, then I don’t see how anyone’s objection over whether you are Jon Stark or Jon Snow would matter. You seem to know her well enough; do you think she would agree to it?”

Sansa watched as he continued to fidget with the handle of his tankard, eyes focused on the table and not meeting her gaze.

“Perhaps,” her brother said quietly, and she got the impression he was being intentionally vague. “If it were in the best interests of her campaign.”

And then she saw it. A flicker of an expression across his face, the softness in the tone of his voice when he spoke of her. A twinge of pain as he considered the alternative. He did want to marry her, but it was more than that.

“You’re in love with her,” she gasped out, shocked.

Jon finally met her eyes, looking up at her. He seemed to battle with himself on whether or not to answer.
“Yes,” he replied after a moment, voice quiet.

Well this changes things.

It was her turn to be silent now, and she sat there and watched all the ways this could go wrong flash through her mind.

“I assume this is a…” She grasped for words. “…mutual understanding.”

He let out an exasperated breath. “It is.”

“I’m sure you realize the timing is not ideal.”

“I’m aware.” His responses were short and emotionless, her cue to drop the subject.

She wasn’t going to. “Were you even going to tell me?” her tone was accusatory; a rebuke.

“There are other things to focus on right now,” he deflected.

It both was and wasn’t an answer. She sighed. “How long has it been going on?” she asked, desperate for information. “The lords aren’t going to like this when they find out.”

“How long has it been going on?” she pressed. “They have the right to know if their king has other priorities.” She paused. “If you would save her life over yours, or the lives of your own people, because you love her.”

Her words hung in the air between them like a heavy curtain. Jon met her gaze, “There is no danger of that from me or from her,” he replied, a tense anger in his voice. “I thought you would know me a little better than that.”

“I do,” she whispered, reaching out to grab his hand. He didn’t pull away from her, and she held it tightly. “I’m just worried. I want to know all the facts so that I can help you.”

There’s no one here to bring you back if you are murdered again.

They were interrupted by the sound of the heavy wooden door creaking open, echoing loudly behind her. Sansa turned to the door with annoyance. She’d asked the guards to keep them from being disturbed.

“You’re both still in here?” It was Arya, returned from showing the Queen and her retinue to the Guest House.

“Yes, but we were just finished,” Sansa said, waving her off. Adding Arya to this conversation would not do anyone any favors.

Arya looked between the both of them with a raised eyebrow, but she seemed content to let whatever
was on her mind remain so for the time being. She eventually turned to address Jon. “Bran wanted to speak with you,” she said to him. “Wants you to come by his room.”

“I know,” Jon replied, taking a drink, a small furrow between his brows, but obviously relieved that their conversation had been interrupted. “I told him I’d go and see him tomorrow.”

“He seemed more like the old Bran at dinner,” Arya remarked idly, apparently noting the tense silence between them. “He was almost personable.”

_Small mercies_, Sansa thought to herself. The last thing she needed was for Bran to upset an alliance by remarking on things he wasn’t supposed to know.

“Sam said that he’s getting a better grasp on his...gift,” she replied, both to her and to Jon. “That it’s a bit easier to control. Doesn’t take up so much of his mind now.” Her voice was tinged with relief. Before Arya had returned, Bran had been nearly impossible to be around; always seeming elsewhere, remarking on people and events she’d never heard of, his eyes unseeing as he focused only on the visions in his head. It had pained her greatly, as if she’d been reunited with a shell of Bran, and the brother she knew had been long dead.

“Sam’s been helping him?” Jon asked, curiously.

She nodded. “He seems to understand him better than anyone else. Helps temper the stranger aspects of whatever it means to be the Three-Eyed Raven.”

“Well if anyone could figure it out, it would be Sam,” he replied, pushing back the bench and standing, setting the empty tankard down on the table. “If it’s alright with the two of you I think I’ll head for bed.”

_Probably not a bad idea for all of them to do so._

Before they parted ways, Sansa grabbed her brother by the arm and hugged him tightly, not keen on separating with anger after so many months apart. “I’m glad you are home,” she whispered to him as he returned her embrace.

“I don’t think I’ve ever seen the two of you hug before,” Arya commented after he’d left, a weird expression on her face as if she’d just witnessed something she’d have rather not.

“A lot has changed,” Sansa replied tersely, not really wanting to get into it and sitting back down on the wooden bench next to her. “I hugged you, didn’t I?”

“Once, and I took it for temporary madness.”

“Perhaps it was.”

They sat together in companionable silence, listening to the crackle of the fire. Her sister was quiet for a moment before speaking again. “I wonder what Mother would think of all this,” she murmured, a note of sadness in her voice. “Night Kings. Jon as King in the North. A Targaryen in our home.”

“She’d doubt she’d be particularly pleased by any of it,” Sansa remarked. “And of those things, she would certainly find a way to make Jon the worst of them.”
A dark look crossed her sisters face. “I still don’t understand why she treated him so badly,” she grumbled, mostly to herself. “It’s not like he asked to be born the way he was.”

“People do irrational things for irrational reasons,” Sansa replied. “Who knows why she did anything? Frankly, the older I get the less I understand her.” She sighed. “What I remember of her, anyway.”

“I don’t remember her much at all,” Arya murmured quietly. “I can barely picture her face now.”

Another long silence stretched between them, and Sansa looked over to see Arya quickly brush a tear from her cheek. She reached out and took one of her hands and squeezed, trying to put as much comfort into the gesture she could. “Me neither,” she admitted. “I remember the way it felt when she brushed my hair. The sound of her voice when she scolded Bran for climbing. The way she always smelled of flowers. But if you asked me to draw her face? I doubt I could.”

“That’s because you’re shit at drawing,” Arya replied. It was almost a reflexive response, though it was probably also a way to lighten the mood a bit. She was like Jon in that regard; reluctant to talk about feelings and other such difficult things. Sansa suppressed a smile in favor of a look of mock indignation.

“I can certainly draw better than you.”

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Later that night, Sansa found herself awoken abruptly by the sound of quiet, but insistent, knocking. **Was it morning already?** Had she overslept? Sansa turned to look out her window only to see that it was still dark outside. The candle near her bed showed that there were a couple of hours yet before morning.

“Come in,” she said, when the knocker repeated themselves. The door opened tentatively to reveal her handmaiden, a worried look on her face.

“My Lady, I’m sorry for the interruption,” she began. “But I’m afraid Lord Stark and Lord Tarly need to speak with you. They claim it is a matter of grave importance.”

Sansa raised her eyebrows in concern as she threw the bedcovers off herself, reaching for the robe laid carefully across the chair at her bedside. She tied it around herself quickly and followed the girl out into her sitting room where her brother and Sam were waiting by the fire.

“What is it?” she asked, eyes wide. “What happened?” The handmaiden went to stoke the fire from its embers as Sansa sat herself down near it.

Sam glanced at Bran nervously before speaking. “I’m so sorry for disturbing you, Lady Sansa,” he started, when it became obvious that Bran was not going to say anything. “But Bran has...seen something…that I’m afraid couldn’t wait.”

Sansa looked from her brother to Sam and back, waiting for them to explain.

“Last Hearth has no idea the Wall has fallen,” Bran said after a long moment. “They haven’t received our ravens.”

“What about the men Jon sent?”
“They are delayed by a storm and will not reach them in time.”

She closed her eyes briefly in despair at the bad news. She’d done everything she could, yet still she felt helpless knowing that little Ned Umber and those under his care were doomed to a death she could not warn them of.

“How are you telling me this?” she asked finally. It seemed cruel to wake her for this; she could just as easily mourn for Last Hearth when the sun was up. Why did Bran have to rouse Sam and her to relay this news?

“The Night King is headed west,” Bran said. “There is still time to get to the Umbers and send them south ahead of his army.”

“How?” she asked, the ever-present furrow between her brows deepening. “How can we do anything if the men Jon sent won’t make it there?”

“A man on a horse will not,” he said cryptically. “But a Queen, on a dragon, could do it.”

“You mean for Daenerys Targaryen to go?” she repeated, raising an eyebrow. “Then why are you coming to me? Why not her? Or Jon?”

“Well, we tried,” Sam said, almost reluctantly. “But Jon wasn’t in his room and no one knows where he’s gone. We came to you straight after.”

Where in the name of the Old Gods and the New was Jon? Why was he not in his room at this hour? She turned to her handmaiden, who was in the process of leaving. “Go and see if you can find anyone who knows where my brother is,” she asked her. “Ser Davos may know. And send someone to ask Lord Tyrion and his Queen to join us.” Jon is probably with the Queen now, she thought, irritated and slightly put off by the idea.

The girl nodded quickly in affirmation and promptly disappeared out the door.

“How much time do we have?” she asked, turning back to Bran.

“I don’t know,” he answered. “It depends.”

“On?”

“On how long it takes him to destroy Castle Black.”

Chapter End Notes

yoooo sorry about how terrible I am at updating. I have no excuses really except to say that I do work on this story quite a bit - only a lot of the time its on the (in my opinion) more exciting parts that come up later and unfortunately I had a huge case of the selfdoubts when it came to this chapter.

Daenerys is up next.

Also, I could use a beta if anyone is interested. omgpleasehelpmef.
Daenerys and Tyrion followed their Northern escort across the courtyard. It had stopped snowing and now the world around them was blanketed in a soft, calming whiteness. They spoke no words, the crunching of the new snow under their boots the only sound in the pre-dawn darkness. Two Dothraki accompanied them, the strangeness of their surroundings putting a damper on the typical banter that would usually take place between them. Daenerys was glad that she, Jorah, and Missandei were the only ones that could understand; on the road they had been more than a little rowdy and quite a bit more than a little inappropriate. However, she had gotten used to the constant stream of Dothraki conversation in her presence, which made the absence of it now quite noticeable.

Missandei had woken her a short time ago, rousing her out of a dead sleep. The bed in the Winterfell Guest House was the pinnacle of luxury to her after the weeks of travel, and she’d fallen asleep nearly as soon as she’d lain down. It was a wonder that her advisor could wake her at all, surrounded as she was by soft furs and a warm fire.

However, it was the urgency in her tone as she was gently shaken awake that had eventually broken through her - thankfully dreamless - slumber.

Sansa Stark had sent a messenger in the darkest hours of the morning, requesting her and Lord Tyrion to join her in her chambers. It had been conveyed with some degree of haste, and so Daenerys had complied, foregoing the usual formal braids and dress in favor of a fur-lined dressing coat over her night shift; her hair down completely except for the simple clasp that held some of it back at the top of her neck.

Tyrion had not a clue as to what the Lady of Winterfell could possibly want at this hour, though his face betrayed a hint of concern. He knew her, and knew that she would not impose upon them like this without a dire need.

She had been a gracious host thus far, however, her face remained a neutral mask that refused to betray any opinion that she may have of her guests outside of a general politeness. According to Tyrion she favored her mother in both looks and demeanor, and Daenerys agreed that there could be no one further opposite of Jon and Arya than she.

Daenerys supposed calm neutrality was better than the open disdain she’d been expecting.

“Seven hells,” Tyrion hissed under his breath, breaking the silence as they strode through the courtyard. Swearing was very uncharacteristic of her Hand, she realized, and she turned to stare at him in surprise as he stopped in his tracks. He didn’t notice her gaze, and instead was fixed upon something ahead of him, eyes widened in a mix of wonder and terror. She followed his eyesight into
the distance, but all she could see was snow.

Then, out of the shadows, a great white wolf loped into view, taller than even the largest wolf she’d ever seen, the animal’s head nearly at chest height to her. Her gasp was audible, and she heard the Dothraki murmur behind her in alarm.

Piercing red eyes met hers in the darkness, glittering brightly in the torchlight, and they held hers with what seemed to be a mild curiosity.

“It’s just Ghost, your Grace,” Sansa’s messenger said hurriedly, making a reassuring gesture, though her eyes betrayed her own wariness of the beast. “The kings direwolf. He’ll not harm you.”

Ghost.

Of course, Jon had mentioned his companion once or twice, with the longing, wistful air one would use to describe an old friend. Somehow, he had failed to really impart to her the sheer size of the animal, and in her imagination he was merely the size of any dog she had seen running with the khalasar, or along the streets of Meereen. Coming face to face with the great creature now put all of her guesswork to shame.

Daenerys quickly murmured a translation of the girl’s words to her Dothraki, so they would know the wolf meant them no harm. The revelation that it was Jon’s companion - or Wolf King as they had taken to calling him - seemed to immediately replace fear with curiosity and awe.

Ghost took a couple padded steps forward, but kept his distance, his eyes still focused on her with a great intensity. She took a deep breath and kept steady eye contact with the great animal, whose eyes held hers with a surprising depth. Like he was looking into her soul, reading her thoughts. Slowly, she reached out to him, a soft gesture that she hoped conveyed peace. The wolf leaned his head forward, brushing her fingertips with his nose ever so slightly. Behind her, she heard her Dothraki murmur tense words.

“Ghost, to me.”

The wolf turned instantly and loped towards the sound of Jon’s voice, which trailed through the silent courtyard. She watched as Jon emerged from behind an awning, looking just as she’d left him the evening before, fully dressed with his cloak and sword. She wondered if he’d even slept at all.

“I knew that dire wolves were larger than the usual wolf one would find south of the wall,” Tyrion managed to say after a long moment, in which the group seemed to let out a collective breath, once he regained focus. “But this is beyond belief.”

“He was just a pup when you and I traveled to the Wall together,” Jon replied, petting the wolf behind the ears. Ghost’s tongue lolled in satisfaction, as if he were any normal dog. “Would you believe he’s the runt of his litter?”

Tyrion blinked. “If he got any larger I’d dare say you could ride him into battle instead of a horse.”

Jon let out an amused snort. “Aye, wouldn’t that be a sight?”

“Your lady sister has requested the Queen meet with her in her sitting room, your Grace,” the handmaiden said in explanation as to why they were all out at such an hour.
“She’s summoned for me as well,” he replied, nodding and gesturing for her to continue on their way to the keep. That must be why he seemed unsurprised to come upon them in such a way.

Daenerys looked at him with concern as he fell into step beside her. “You look like you haven’t slept,” she murmured quietly.

“I slept enough,” he replied, the reassuring tone did not reach his eyes. “No need to worry.”

She resisted the urge to reach out and grab his hand as they walked up the wooden steps to the breezeway. Ghost bounded on ahead of them, seeming to know where they were headed, full of the energy of an excited pup despite his massive size.

“I think we’re well past the point of not worrying about each other.”

There was a shadow of a smile that crossed his face. “I suppose that’s true,” he acknowledged.

Lady Sansa’s chambers were warm and well decorated, though it had much of the same Northern simplicity as the rest of the keep. A set of armchairs and a table sat by a large fireplace, a desk in the corner of the room was littered with parchment. A large chest that seemed to contain swathes of fabric lay half opened near it. She remembered Jon told her that his sister was a fair hand at sewing.

Ghost had made a home for himself on the rug by the fire, walking ahead of them as if it were his room they’d followed him into. His presence seemed to be a bit of a curiosity to Sansa, who’d thought the wolf had run off when he’d not accompanied Arya home again. Jon had seemed wholly unconcerned about it, merely shrugging at her questions. “Ghost goes where he feels he needs to be,” was his only reply.

She concentrated on the animal now, focusing on the bright whiteness of his fur, the soft rise and fall of his breathing as he seemed blissfully unaware of the tension between the people in the room with him. Bran Stark’s words echoed in her mind, the gnawing, worrying knot of doubt and anxiety forming a dense ball in the pit of her stomach.

_They don’t know what’s coming._

_They need you to help them._

Part of her was angry; angry at the situation, angry about Viserion; angry at Jon for convincing her not to go to Last Hearth sooner. She could have had those people marching south already, well in advance of the Army of the Dead.

She knew why he’d done so, of course. They’d had no information at the time. They couldn’t have known where the Night King intended to strike. Now, impossibly, Brandon Stark had seen him. Or rather, seen where he _wasn’t_.

“You don’t believe me.” Bran’s voice cut through the silence, and she looked up at the feeling of his
eyes on her. It was unnerving, somewhat, to maintain eye contact, as it felt that somehow he was staring straight into your soul. Everyone in the room turned to look at her, and she blinked.

“It’s not that I don’t believe you,” Daenerys started. “It’s just...difficult to wrap my mind around.” How could someone see things without being there? How could someone know things they weren’t present to hear? Or weren’t even alive to know? From what she could gather, Bran Stark could see everything that happened in the world, from the secrets of the most powerful king, to the struggles of the poorest child. When he looked at her, she felt as if she were being thoroughly studied, each event in her life there plain for him to see.

She wondered what he would think of her then, if he did.

“When the sun rises in the West, and sets in the East.”

Her heart skipped a beat at the words, and she almost thought she’d imagined them, a dark echo rising up as she dwelt lightly on her own memories. Bran had murmured it quietly, meeting her horrified gaze with his blank stare. The only person still alive that knew those words was Ser Jorah, who was miles and miles from here. She’d not even told Jon of it, unsure really of how to start such a conversation for one, and secondly she was still quite happy to shove the whole episode into the depths of her past and leave it there.

She wanted to speak, but couldn’t think of anything to say, lost in the dark memories surrounding the losses of her firstborn and her husband. “I’m sorry that happened to you,” Bran continued, his voice seeming to carry remorse, as if he had truly seen and witnessed the worst period of her life in the span of time since they had been standing there.

Daenerys felt eyes on her, but she remained focused on the young man before her, trying to keep herself calm and unaffected. “It’s all in the past,” she replied finally, shoving the memories away. Bran had gotten his desired result, her unwavering belief, and now she wanted to move on from the moment as soon as possible. “We have the present problem to focus on now.”

“You can’t be thinking of going,” Tyrion stated incredulously. “We had this discussion days ago; it’s too risky.”

“The Night King isn’t there,” Daenerys pointed out. “If I have a chance to save those people I’m going to take it.”

“At the risk of your own life?”

“I’m not one to cower behind walls while other people fight for me,” Daenerys snapped. “You know this. I’m not having this argument again.”

Tyrion sighed. “You can’t save everyone.”

“Ned Umber is barely one and ten,” Sansa interjected. “There are over a thousand fighting men under his command. We need them alive and on our side.”

Tyrion didn’t have much to say to that, looking from Sansa back to Daenerys with a sorrowful expression. It was hard to argue against saving a child. “I watched you fly north once before,” he murmured to her. “I spent days wondering if I had just watched you fly off to your death, and there was nothing I could do to stop it.”
Her heart softened a bit, her anger lessening. “I will not be facing what I did before,” Daenerys replied, reaching out to place a hand on his shoulder. She hoped he would find it comforting, but he was still and rigid under her hand.

A heavy silence fell over the room, and she turned away from Tyrion to address Jon, who was standing apart from the group, leaning against the wall, looking down. “You have nothing to say?” she asked him, partly as a challenge and partly out of simple curiosity. It was not like him to keep his opinions to himself on such matters.

Jon looked up at her, his face the same as it always was; unreadable but for the constant stress he carried with him. “I have nothing to add,” he said quietly.

She raised an eyebrow. “You’ve not shied away from speaking your mind to me before.”

He sighed. “No. But Tyrion is right. We’ve already had this discussion and there’s no point having it again.”

“So you agree that I should go.”

“I didn’t say that.”

“So you disagree?”

“I didn’t say that either.” His eyes were steel, flashing with something akin to anger or irritation. “I don’t like the risk, but we can’t afford to lose Ned Umber’s men.”

“Are you objecting to this as my ally?” Daenerys challenged, letting the warmth of her irritation fuel her response. “Or my husband?”

She didn’t really know why she chose that particular word, only that ally, or friend, both seemed too pale to really describe the bond between them, and lover seemed too crass. They were more than that, surely.

There was an awkward amount of shuffling between the rest of the room at her choice of words, though she ignored it.

Jon held her gaze for a moment before answering, eyes steely grey. “I’m not your husband,” he murmured.

“A technicality that I hope will be remedied upon my return,” she replied, pointedly ignoring Tyrion’s gaze when she said it. “But that doesn’t answer my question. If this was anyone else—“

“If it were anyone else he would be halfway there by now,” Ser Davos said, speaking for the first time. The end of the sentence punctuated by a small sigh of defeat.

Jon didn’t contradict him. “I’ll be going with you,” he said, his tone daring her to disagree.

“I don’t need you to protect me,” she snapped.

“Certainly the Gods know I don’t need to be doing that,” he replied, just as testy as she.

“Wait - Jon, let’s think about this a moment,” Sansa protested. “Your lords are going to start arriving today. How do you expect me to explain this to them?”

“In simple terms and small words, I expect,” Jon answered, annoyed. “Daenerys can’t go alone. Ned isn’t going to abandon his home on the word of a foreign Queen he’s never met. I need to go with
her.”

“If something happens then we lose you both,” Tyrion pointed out. “And then what would you have us do?”

“Lord Tyrion has a point,” Ser Davos interjected before Daenerys or Jon could come up with a response. “Is there no one else we can send? Or perhaps a letter with your seal?”

Jon shook his head. “It has to be me.”

The room was silent for a long moment, until Sansa sighed in defeat. “I suppose I can’t stop you if you’ve made up your mind,” she said finally, her words echoing into the silence.

It wasn’t long before she and her small council were standing just outside the northernmost gate of Winterfell. The sun was just beginning to rise, tinging the sky with a dusting of pale pink and orange. The sky was bright and clear, and the new fallen snow from yesterday’s stormy weather sparkled with pristine clarity on the rolling hills and fields that spread before her.

“This is quite a heroic action,” Tyrion commented through the silence as they waited on Jon to join them. “You will return for many more, I hope.”

Daenerys arched an eyebrow as a calm, but icy, breeze swirled through their group. “Your definition of heroism, or mine?” she asked as she adjusted her cloak so that the fur warmed more of her neck.

“Oh, certainly yours,” he replied glibly. “Brave…and stupid.”

She gave him a wry half-smile in reply. “It’s not intended to be heroics. It’s the right thing to do.”

Tyrion regarded her with a calculating expression. She knew he had many more comments on his mind - certainly most of them involving her decision to formally acknowledge her relationship with Jon Snow - but they all remained unvoiced. A long overdue discussion for another time.

Footsteps in the snow behind them announced Jon’s arrival, with Ser Davos and Arya with him. Searching out with her mind, she called to Drogon. A warm roar sounded in her thoughts in answer.

“Are you ready?” she asked Jon as she approached, noting his slight fixation on her outfit. She had decided to dress in the Northern style for their journey, partly out of practicality and partly out of strategy. And perhaps a not-too-insignificant part of her that secretly delighted in the way his eyes briefly flicked up and down to take her in.

“I am,” he responded, his pause apparently noticeable only to her.

She smiled. “Good,” she replied, feeling Drogon’s steady presence growing warmer in her mind. She bid him land in the field in front of them, and heard his answering roar echo through the skies.

Arya whipped her head around at the sound, and they all watched as Drogon appeared through the thick morning clouds, the gusts of his wings throwing up snow in every direction, the strength of his landing shaking the very ground they stood upon. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Jon take a very small step backwards, his eyes wide and apprehensive.

Thankfully, there was very little roaring and posturing on the part of her largest dragon, and for that
she was grateful. She was not blind to the growing audience on the top of the wall above her and
didn’t want to cause more of a scare than was necessary.

Daenerys strode up to Drogon with confidence and purpose, the dragon’s body already lowered in
anticipation of what she needed. She took one step up, feeling the warmth that pulsed under his
scales and taking comfort from it. She then turned to stretch out her hand to Jon. “Don’t be afraid,
my love,” she said to him.

After a brief moment of hesitation, he reached out and grasped her hand.

Last Hearth was a great keep, a large structure of grey stone in the midst of a field of white. To the
north of it, a small forest of green, snow-topped trees spread out before it. It was not quite so large as
Winterfell, with a central keep and courtyard and a small village sprawled to the south.

She bid Drogon to land in the great fields near the western side, and as her child landed with a low
rumble and a look back at her, she couldn’t help but grin at the thrill of it. Turning about, she could
see the same look on Jon’s face; windswept but full of the same joy that only flight could give.

“Is it like that each time?” he asked her as he followed her down to the ground, less gracefully than
she but eager and not as timid as before.

She looked at him, unable to prevent herself from beaming. “Yes,” she replied. “Was it as you
thought it would be?”

He straightened out his scabbard and ran his fingers through his hair to tame it. “I don’t think I could
have imagined how that felt if I tried.”

Drogon made a low, throaty chirp at her, and she silently gave him leave to take to the skies again,
instructing him to stay close and to the south. The beat of his wings sent air rushing by them, and she
felt Jon’s hand on her arm to steady her, a warm, reflexive touch, as he didn’t seem to know that he’d
done it. A feeling a warmth spread through her as they stood close together, watching Drogon
disappear into the morning sky. She turned to look at him then, watching his face as he stared at her
dragon in wonder.

There was fear there no longer.

The sounds of men and horses approaching interrupted the moment, and she turned to see five riders
heading towards them with appreciable haste. Jon slowly moved to stand slightly in front of her.

“Jon Snow and Queen Daenerys Targaryen, here to see Lord Umber,” Jon said without much
preamble. “Immediately. It’s a matter of some urgency.”

The lead man was silent for a bit, looking between the two of them and the black speck in the sky
that would be Drogon.

“Welcome, your Grace,” the man said, nodding to Jon. He seemed to be the least curious of his
companions, his face steady and betraying neither the fear nor the curiosity that the other men wore
so plainly on their faces. “I must say that you chose a rather unusual method of transportation to our
corner of the kingdom.”
“As I said,” Jon replied, his voice maintaining its even tone. “It’s urgent.”

A tense silence burgeoned between them all, and Daenerys felt more than one pair of eyes on her, whether in curiosity or malice, she could not tell.

“Very well then,” the leader said, gesturing for them to follow as he led them to the great wooden gates of the keep. She felt more pairs of eyes on her as they walked, some more hostile than others. She stayed close to Jon.

As they entered the main courtyard, she watched as a small boy hurtled himself down the steps that led to the keep proper; a maester and a number of others hastening behind in an effort to keep up.

“Your Grace!” the boy said breathlessly, smoothing out his cloak in an effort to look presentable. “You’ve returned!” He looked nervously from Jon to Daenerys, apparently uncertain as to what he should think about their abrupt appearance at such an hour, and on dragonback, no less.

“I have,” Jon acknowledged, then turned to introduce her in his succinct, straightforward way. *Daenerys of House Targaryen.* No “Unburnt.” No “Breaker of Chains.” Just her name.

“Welcome to Last Hearth, your Grace,” Ned Umber replied, stumbling a bit over his words in his nervousness, his eyes wide as he focused on her properly for the first time, his youth apparent.

“My sister has been sending ravens that have gone unanswered,” Jon continued. “Queen Daenerys has brought me up here to make sure there is still time for you to heed those warnings.”

Ned’s brows furrowed. “We haven’t gotten any ravens,” he replied, confusion in his voice. “None at all in weeks.”

“The winter makes ravens a rather unreliable method this far north, my Lord.” His maester had caught up with them, interjecting himself into the conversation without so much as a pause, his tone as if he were explaining a something to a boy much younger than ten. “Lady Sansa should know this.”

The maester eyed Daenerys with open suspicion and mistrust, and she rather felt the same towards him in return, though she tried to keep her face a blank mask of neutrality.

“She also sent riders, but we felt this couldn’t wait,” Jon interjected, eyeing the maester with frustration at the interruption. He turned to Ned and regarded him with a calm, but serious expression. “You need to organize your people and send them south,” he said. “Send them to Winterfell. The Army of the Dead destroyed the Wall at Eastwatch, and they are coming here.”

Ned’s eyes widened, and he looked to his Maester for guidance. The older man scoffed in disbelief. “You can’t be suggesting he completely abandon his home.”

“I wouldn’t be asking this of you if it’s weren’t important,” Jon said, an edge to his voice as he spoke. “But there’s no way you can fight them back on your own. You need to retreat to the safety of Winterfell before it’s too late.”

Ned seemed frozen with indecision, and Daenerys did not envy the boy this burden. She felt for him deeply; her heart saddened by the weight Ned had to carry at so young an age. No child should wear the responsibility of his people so heavily around his shoulders.

“I have looked through my records, and written to the archmaesters at the Citadel,” the maester replied, his voice carrying an haughty air as he addressed Jon. “We have found no evidence that the threat you saw beyond the Wall exists. I am not about to let Lord Umber give up his home because
you were taken in by your father’s superstitions.”

There was a dark silence as Jon regarded the man, who eyed him with a willful expression of defiance. She was angry on Jon’s behalf; that this man would speak so daringly, so insolently, against his king? She wanted to say something, and in the back of her mind she toyed with the fantasy of having Drogon swoop down and carry the man off. However, she waited while Jon seemed to contemplate how to address the situation.

“I did not come here on some whim,” he said quietly, though his voice was a low growl. “I did not spend weeks and months away from home trying to secure alliances because I enjoy political games. I did it so that when the Night King comes for us we would have a fighting chance to live in this world long enough to see spring again.” He turned to address Ned again, his tone softening. “I know this is hard,” he said. “But castles and keeps can be rebuilt. Surviving is all that matters now.”

“I have seen the dead army your King speaks of,” Daenerys added, speaking for the first time. Her interjection startled the boy a bit, who turned to look at her, flushed with nervousness once again. “I have come North to help you. Ride south today, and my armies will protect your people.”

_I am not the Targaryen monster rumors have painted me to be._

There was fear in Ned’s eyes as he regarded her, though it seemed to fade a bit when she spoke. She smiled softly at him, which also seemed to help ease the boy’s nerves. He drew himself up a bit taking a deep breath as he did so.

“Tell me what I need to do.”

Chapter End Notes

so I had intended for this chapter to contain the entirety of their adventure in Last Hearth, but I had a burst of inspiration and it's now split into two. most of the delay on this was me waffling about formatting and the fact that I basically wrote two chapters at once. I hope to have the next chapter up soon.

also pls note that I only did a cursory edit of this because I wanted to get it posted. If you see any egregious errors let me know.

also also this is unrelated but is anyone else devastated by Infinity War or is that just me
Jon stood atop the southern wall, watching as a trail of smallfolk and horse carts trundled its way down the road. The front of the caravan had already disappeared over the horizon, and, not for the first time that day, he wondered what would have happened if they had not come.

Last Hearth had not been prepared to leave at all. Sansa’s warnings about the Wall had not been received, nor had her earlier message summoning the Lord Umber to Winterfell to greet his King’s return. In fact, no word from anywhere had been received at all, and scouts that recently patrolled the small wood to the north of the keep had nothing to report.

According to Lord Umber, they usually had occasional communication with Eastwatch-by-the-sea with regard to food, men, or other supplies needed, but no word had come from them in weeks.

The thought of that made his chest clench with worry. He had sent Tormund there, a friend, a man who had risked his life many times over to see his people safely beyond the Wall, only for him to die upon it in service of him

Another friend, gone.

A cold breeze whirled past, sharp across his face. He’d forgone his cloak for the journey here, opting instead for thicker, fur-lined layers beneath the usual leather gambeson and steel. He was warm enough, though the breeze did an apt job at reminding him of the absence of that fur collar.

“Your Grace, I’ve gathered the men you asked for.”

The voice belonged to Ser Darron, Last Hearth’s master-at-arms. The older man had a quiet demeanor and little patience for nonsense, and Jon found him quite likeable despite the few words shared between them. He acknowledged Ser Darron with a nod and turned to follow him back down to the courtyard, sparing one last glance out across the southern fields and the line of carts that trundled steadily southward out of sight.

“I’ve sent them to the Hall to await your further instruction,” Ser Darron continued as they descended, boots thudding dully on the stone steps. “Lord Umber spoke to them earlier.”

Jon was glad of that. Ned Umber was young, but smart and eager to learn. He had the respect of the men that followed him and didn’t take that responsibility lightly. It was clear that the master-at-arms provided a careful guiding influence for the boy, and he was glad to see that was the one that seemed
to have won out over the maester’s obtuse cynicism.

“And what news of the progress south?” Jon asked as they crossed the courtyard, stepping around piles of supplies still waiting to be loaded south.

“We have most of the keep and ready to load up and depart,” he replied. “The smallfolk are nearly all on the road as we speak.”

“How long until the keep is emptied?”

“Dawn, perhaps.”

The sun was just now settling in the west, and torches were already lit against the coming darkness. It would be a long night ahead of them yet. He sighed, “And the scouts?”

The master-at-arms paused before answering. Jon knew what he was going to say before the words were said aloud. “None have returned, your Grace,” he said quietly.

An ill sign indeed. At least one of the men they’d sent should have reported back by now. It didn’t take his experience fighting the dead to know what losing them would mean. They needed to leave, and quickly.

Before them, the great oak doors of Last Hearth’s main hall stood open. Firelight flickered, warm and inviting, as it spilled out across the steps. Jon entered to see twenty men gathered near the great hearth in the middle of the room, straightening when they noticed his arrival.

“Here are the twenty men,” the Ser Darron said by way of introduction. “All volunteers, as you asked.”

Jon studied them all for a moment. Most were older men with hard, world-weary faces, though there were a few younger men of the Freefolk that stood with them. “You all know why I’ve asked you here,” Jon started after a brief moment. “I’ve asked for volunteers to stay behind not to defend it, but to act as a warning for us when the Night King breaches these walls.” His words were greeted with silence. “We need to know when he strikes here so we can track his speed and movements across the North.”

Going into as much detail as he could, Jon went through all of the knowledge he had about the Others; that fire would be their best weapon should they be forced to engage, though he stressed again that they were ordered to run, not to fight.

“Death won’t end your role in this war,” he said as he finally dismissed them. “It will only change which side you are on.”

An hour or so later he went looking for Daenerys. She had been with Ned Umber most of the afternoon, and the two of them had spent a majority of their time in the courtyard loading carts with any and all supplies that could be deemed useful. Food, weapons, tools, clothes, animals. The winter was already the worst that many alive had seen, and Jon was not about to abandon supplies to the dead if they could prevent even one person from dying of starvation or exposure.

Thankfully, outside of the maester’s vocal objections upon their arrival, there was little drama in the keep at Daenerys’ presence among them. Ned, of course, was too young to fully grasp the reason or extent of long-held grudges between houses, and most of Last Hearth seemed to be far enough removed from the effects of Robert’s Rebellion to really spare too much thought towards her family.
name, or they were Freefolk and thus cared little for the rights and titles of a southern queen.

Jon was grateful for this. He’d been worried on their way up here that most would be too stuck in the grudges of the past to understand Daenerys was there to help, and he didn’t want to waste the precious little time they had talking his people down from doing something stupid.

The eager voice of Ned Umber trailed down the hall as he reached the top of the darkened stairway.

“This is one of my favorites,” the boy was saying, his voice excited as the sound of tumbling books echoed out into the hall. “It’s the story of Brandon the Breaker.”

“I’m afraid I don’t know that one,” Daenerys responded as Jon approached.

She sat on a wooden bench near the desk, perched on it with a straight back and chin, graciously accepting the book Ned handed her. “My father used to read it to me,” Ned continued, opening the book to a page towards the middle. “And it has drawings, see –

The boy stopped abruptly mid sentence as he noticed Jon standing in the doorway. “Your Grace!”

Ned acknowledged quickly with a bow of his head. He tried not to hate it.

“It’s near time for us to leave,” Jon told the young Lord without preamble. “If your things are prepared, the Queen and I will take you to Winterfell with us.”

It took a moment of silence for Ned to realize the implication, and then something akin to both fear and excitement flashed across his face. He straightened himself up quickly, eyes wide. “You mean for me to go…on the dragon?”

“I need you present when I meet with the rest of the Lords,” Jon explained. “I’m afraid it can’t wait for you to make the journey on foot.”

Ned looked from him and then to Daenerys, who returned his questioning gaze with a soft reassurance. “It will be alright, my Lord,” she said. “I won’t let any harm come to you.”

The boy swallowed nervously. “How long until we go?”

“As soon as you are ready.”

Ned hastily took his leave and rushed down the hall to gather what things he needed from his chambers. Daenerys stood and walked to the doorway, the book still in her hand. “What do you think?” she asked him with a wry smile, turning the book over to display the page Ned had showed her. “Is it an accurate likeness?”

The drawing showed an elaborate detailing of the Night King at the Wall, with the Night’s Watch all lying as prisoners at his feet. It was a fanciful rendition, with the artist depicting the Night King in flowing blue robes and a shock of white hair, and the Night's Watch all resembling more like crows than men.

A barest smile twitched at the corner of his mouth. “I’d rather fight this version, seems much easier to defeat.”

She turned the book back around and closed it gently. “And rather less frightening, in my opinion.” Daenerys made to put the book back on the shelf, but then she hesitated. “I think perhaps Ned might like to keep this,” she murmured, tucking it gently into the small bag at her feet and slinging it across her shoulders.
“He seems quite taken with you,” Jon acknowledged as they made their way back down the hallway. “One more Northern lord on your side.”

“Yes,” she agreed. “I have enjoyed his company. Very talkative, once you get him going. A shame he had to come into his role so young. No time to enjoy a childhood.” Sadness colored her voice.

“War has thrust a lot of responsibilities on young shoulders.”

The Hall was mostly empty as they approached. The few men and women that remained were hastily taking whatever supplies left piled on the tables out to carts waiting outside. There was still so much left to do and so little time to do it.

“How long will it take Drogon to reach us?” he asked Daenerys as they made their way over to the hearth.

She frowned a bit. “Perhaps an hour,” she replied, her tone worried. “I called for him earlier, but he’s flown a bit farther from us than I wanted.”

Damn. “Let me know when he’s close,” he said. “We need to leave as soon as possible.”

Her brow furrowed again. “What aren’t you telling me?” she asked, picking up on his sudden urgency.

“The scouts we sent out this morning never returned,” he whispered, voice steady despite his ever-increasing worry. “The longer we stay here the more danger we are in.”

Her expression hardened. “Will the rest of the people here get out in time?”

“We can’t stay here,” he insisted, knowing what she was thinking without her having to say it. “We’re not prepared to fight.”

“Won’t the people here need us?”

Jon looked at her for a long moment, hating the own words coming out of his mouth. “We just have to hope that they’ll make south in time. Ser Darron thinks they’ll be on their way south by dawn, but I’d like for us to have left well before then. We’ve prepared them as best we can.”

She sighed. Frustration practically crackled out of her like the fire they stood near as she looked around them. Things were moving along, but he needed them to go faster. Anxiety pressed in on him like a dark cloud.

What if this was all for nothing? What if I’m just sending them out to die in the snow?

Her eyes searched his face, and he felt as if she could read what he was thinking. “You take too much worry upon yourself,” she murmured. “I wish you’d let me help you.”

Slowly, he reached out to take her hand, finding comfort in it. “You do,” he said. “When you’re near.”

Daenerys smiled at him, though it was a brief, fleeting shadow of one.

“Your Grace!”

Jon released her hand and turned away to see Ser Darron hurrying in his direction.
“What is it?” he asked, noting the man’s unease.

“A scout’s returned,” he whispered, voice low enough for only Jon and Daenerys to hear. “Galloped into the courtyard on a horse half mad with fear. Can’t make much sense of what he’s saying.”

Jon felt the sinking pit in his stomach turn to lead. He turned to Daenerys, “We need to leave, now.”

She nodded once in understanding, and he saw her eyes fade to look at something far away as she reached out to Drogon once again.

“Where is Lord Umber?” The master-at-arms asked, looking around and not seeing the boy with them.

“He’s upstairs,” Daenerys answered, coming quickly back to the conversation. “I will get him while you speak to the scout.” Though she sounded calm, she flashed Jon a look that he took to mean that Drogon would still be some time yet. Damn.

Jon didn’t like the idea of separating but he nodded in agreement. “Meet me in the courtyard,” he said to her. “Do not delay.” Without a word, she swiftly turned back to the stairs they had just descended as he followed the master-at-arms quickly out the door.

“We have him in the stables,” Ser Darron explained. “Didn’t want to start a panic.”

The horse could be heard as they reached the doors, clearly still in the grips of whatever had terrified it, roaring and rearing up dangerously. The scout sat on a stool nearby, eyes wide and hands shaking.

“What happened?” Jon asked, abrupt but not unkind. There was no time to waste.

“I saw them,” the man said, voice hollow and trembling. “Thousands of them.”

Jon clenched his fist at his side. “Where?”

“Some almost looked like the Wildlings that lived there. Some were nothing but bones and rags. Barely seemed like men at all.” The man shuddered violently, continuing on as if he hadn’t heard Jon’s question. “I can still hear the sound of the bones creaking in the snow. And the eyes -” he gasped, staring straight at Jon in abject terror.

“Where did you see them?” Jon asked again, an edge to his voice.

It took a long moment for the man to gather himself again well enough to speak. “All I can see when I close my eyes,” he whispered hoarsely. “All I can see is blue eyes in the dark.”

The words hung in the air like death. A glance at Ser Darron told him that the man had come to the same realization that he had. It had only been dark a couple of hours.

The Dead were already here.

“Order everyone to leave, immediately,” Jon commanded. “Pull the men from the wall and send them all south. Whatever is already on carts now is going to have to do. Leave the rest.”

They both exited the stables and Jon began to make his way back to the keep. He would get Daenerys and Ned on horses and send them down the road to meet Drogon. Each moment they stayed here was a risk; they couldn’t afford to wait for the dragon to come to them. Behind him, he heard the Ser Darron bellowing out orders, and there was a rush of panic about him as his words carried over the remaining soldiers and smallfolk still there.
They only made it halfway across the yard when the familiar screech of a dragon deafened them all. Jon froze, and for a moment the entire courtyard was deathly silent.

Dread covered him like a wave.

He knew it wasn’t Drogon. No animal living, dragon or otherwise, could make such a ragged, painful sound.

Before he could even take another step, there was a booming of great wings, and then the keep before him was ripped apart by blue flame. It threw him to the ground, his left side sliding across the earth and slamming hard into a cart.

He didn’t realize he’d blacked out until there was a soldier suddenly there shaking him, mouthing words he couldn’t hear over the ringing in his ears.

The heat on his face was scorching, and as the man helped him to his feet all he could do was stare in horror at the burning keep before him. The entire northern side of it was gone, the stone unnaturally warped and melted. Blue and orange flame raged, lighting up the night.

It was crippling to think on everything he may have just lost, and he struggled to stay upright. Bodies littered the yard around him; smallfolk and soldiers alike that had all been killed by the debris. Blood dropped into his eye and he made to wipe it away. Screams began to sound through the air. Horses dashed past him in an effort to escape to the west gate. Some held riders and some did not.

Another screech echoed directly from above, so loud that he thought it might shatter his ears. He could feel it in his chest, and in his bones, as it was followed again by the booming of wings. He ducked on instinct as he felt the resulting wind rush past him in a fury, but as he rose again flame shot out of the darkness and carved a deep hole into the northern wall. The ground shook beneath his feet.

“Form a line!” he heard Ser Darron shout, and Jon was only vaguely aware of the clamor of shields and the shouting of men behind him. The master-at-arms drew his sword and came up to stand at his side.

The dust of where the wall once stood hung in front of the breach like a thick fog, billowing upward to mingle with the smoke. He couldn’t see through it, but he knew what was coming for them. His hand went to Longclaw, wrapping his fingers around the hilt. It was almost comforting in its familiarity.

Blue eyes began to shine through the darkness.

He drew his sword, and thought of Daenerys.

Chapter End Notes

some action happening now! and more action to come! also shout out to my IRL friend who looked over this for me, you're the best

let me know what you guys think so far...and thanks for putting up with my infrequent updates.
Daenerys III

Chapter Summary

Last Hearth, part 2

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Daenerys III

*Come on, Dany, she urged herself. Just a little farther.*

She leaned against the wall and took deep, measured breaths. There was a large wound to her left side, long and deep enough for her to know that it needed to be dealt with, and soon. Blood was soaking through the many layers of clothes she wore and she pressed her hand against it.

The act didn’t do much except bloody her already scraped palms even more.

Ned was looking at her worriedly, his eyes bright and shining under the stone dust that covered his face. Aside from the blood matting the hair at his left ear, he seemed unhurt. His face wore a frightened expression that held a hint of desperation in it but he was doing a remarkable job at remaining calm, hoping for instruction from her on what to do. Looking to her to lead.

Daenerys took a couple more breaths before she spoke, trying to shove the pain deep into the back of her mind. “We need to get out,” she said, trying to keep her voice steady. She had no idea what to do. Her mind scrambled over a number of half-formed options as she tried to figure out what was best.

They’d been within arms reach of an outer door when she’d heard Viserion. She’d known it was him immediately; the screech that had echoed through the keep rattled her bones, set her teeth on edge and put anger in her heart. The cry from him felt so *wrong, so dead*, that it pained her to even hear it. Instead of the swell of pride that her children’s cries usually brought, she only felt fear and dread.

There had barely been time for her to do more than shout a warning to Ned before the keep shattered behind them. She was thrown to the ground, her head hitting the stone so hard that she felt strange and disoriented, even now, some time later. Stone had rained down as the ceiling crumbled though thankfully it did not bury them.

She clenched her teeth hard as she tried not to let the pain in her side overwhelm her. Her entire side was warm and sticky with blood, the consequence of a particularly jagged piece of debris. The world swayed and she leaned against the wall to steady herself.

“What can I do?” Ned asked her quietly, looking at her bloodstained hands.

She took a deep breath. Just a moment - a moment is all she needed. “I’ll be alright,” she assured, not sure if it was a lie or not.
Drogon, where are you?

There was an answering roar that echoed both in her ears and in her mind, bright and shining like a beacon of hope that flowed brightly before her. She gripped Ned’s shoulder tightly. That dragon had sounded different to him too, and he’d looked to her for confirmation. “We need to get outside,” she said urgently as he turned to her. He nodded quickly in understanding, and they made their way to the door.

Ned pushed on the handle, but it didn’t budge. He tried again, throwing his weight upon it, but there was only the clicking of the metal handle. “It’s stuck,” he said anxiously. “I can’t move it.”

“Try again,” she said, pulling her arm from the boy’s shoulders and pressing her weight against the door. “We’ll push it together.”

Still, the door did not give way. “I think something’s blocked it,” Ned murmured as Daenerys leaned against the wall. It took nearly all of her effort to keep from sliding down it and remain standing. She began to limp slowly forward, determination and anger fueling her steps and dulling the pain. She had to get out of here. She had to get to Drogon.

The Night King would not claim another child from her today.

They were in a storeroom. Most of the useful things had already been taken earlier in the day, as evidenced by hooks that hung empty on the walls and shelves that had been cleared of their contents. She looked around for anything that could help them pry the door open. Ned continued to push on it, his steady efforts quickly dissolving into frustration as he began to hit the door with all his might.

“Help!” he called out, as loud as he could. “Help!”

Daenerys leaned against the wall and tried to clear her head. She could feel Drogon’s anger and it nearly overwhelmed her. Their roars and screeches were deafening, and distracting, and it took almost all of her willpower to block out the battle raging above them. She tried to take another deep breath.

Come on, Dany.

The room came back into clearer focus, though she still felt as if she were walking through a fog. She began to tear the room apart; clearing shelves, upturning tables, opening drawers and dumping any contents on the floor at her feet.

And there it was, leaning behind a crate in a corner.

An axe.

She reached out for it, the handle worn and dull from disuse, dragging it from its place. It was heavy, but she managed to lift it, ignoring the protesting pain at the effort. Ned watched her as she came to the door, quickly clearing out of her way.

Another deep breath. She pulled the axe back and swung it as hard as she could at the wooden door. The subsequent splintering noise was satisfying, but the dull blade did not do as much damage as
she’d hoped. She yanked the axe out of the door and pulled it back to swing again.

One. Two. Three.

She swung the axe again, hitting close to the same spot as before. The wood cracked beneath it, deeper, revealing a small hole about the size of her fist. Gritting her teeth in determination, she swung again and again. *Come on, Dany*. She could feel the warmth of blood pulsing through the wound in her side, soaking through more of her clothes. She set the axe down and ripped off a chunk of the splintered door and toss it aside. She wiped away blood that had started to coat her hands. She wasn’t sure where it had all come from and did not intend to give much thought to it.

Drogon roared again, one of pain, and her heart jumped into her throat. Fear and fury burned with in her, and she swung the axe again with a cry of rage and desperation. The door was starting to give way, and she fought against the pain to swing another time.

Just once more.

She was able to make a hole in the top of the door large enough for Ned to crawl through, and she let the axe clatter to the floor as she gestured for him to come forward. She peered out of the hole. Stone debris from above was the reason the door was blocked; a large chunk of stone that would have taken a team of horses to remove. She beckoned for Ned to join her.

“I’m going to help you climb out,” she explained, offering her hand.

“What about you?”

“I will follow. Quickly, Ned.”

He jumped at her command, and she pushed him up towards the door. She could tell he was trying to keep as little weight off her as possible, and scrambled out as best he could. Daenerys used her hands to pull some of the smaller pieces of wood away to prevent him from being caught on them.

Once free, he turned and offered her his hand. She grasped it tightly, using the axe to grab at the door frame to pull herself up.

It was agony to do so, but she managed it with Ned’s help and soon she tumbled over the stone and onto the ground below, the axe clattering beside her. She tried to take a breath, but each one provided more pain than relief. The keep burned, a great blaze that threw a whirlwind of flame and smoke into the sky. The stone towers were nothing more than melted stubs, as if they had been made from candle wax instead of stone.

The stars twinkled brightly above her, but as she lay there a dark shadow passed between them, and then another. The boom of dragon wings accompanied it as she pulled herself up. Ned was in the process of righting himself as well, standing next to her, scared, but his face told her that he was ready to follow whatever she meant to do.

The ringing of swords echoed from the courtyard ahead, and Ned gripped tightly to the handle of his own. Even with the axe, she held she felt defenseless and exposed without Drogon. She thrust her fear down deep and adjusted her grip on the handle.

“If we get separated, get south however you can,” she instructed Ned firmly. “Find a horse, ride hard. Do you understand?”

The young lord nodded. “Yes, your Grace,” he said, drawing his sword as he did so. It was a simple blade, and slightly too long for him, but he held it with confidence.
Chaos greeted them in the courtyard, and she looked desperately for Jon. There was a hole in the north wall, the stone warped and melted around it just as the keep had been. Mist flowed through in a rolling cloud, and from it the dead had started to rush forth. Soldiers were there to meet them, and the clash of swords and the cries of men filled her ears. Bodies littered the courtyard.

Daenerys tried to usher Ned around far from danger, but there was no safe place to go. She clutched the axe in her hands. She couldn’t see Jon at all; and stared at the face of each body they passed with her heart in her throat. Ned proceeded ahead of her in a protective stance, his young face was a mask of steel as they undoubtedly passed people that he must have known.

A wight rose up to meet them, close enough to grab at her cloak. She twisted around, despite the painful protest of her injury, and drove the axe deep into the wight’s exposed ribcage. The wight did not slow, and the axe handle was ripped from her grasp as it stumbled back, enraged but unharmed. Ned lunged and took an arm from it with a precise sweep of his sword, but still it pressed forward. She took several steps backwards and almost lost her footing on the uneven stone beneath her. Blue eyes bore down upon them.

A flash of steel, and the head of the wight was cleaved from it’s shoulders. Ned kicked it away, but as his sword was neither dragonglass nor Valyrian steel, the creature continued to grasp and snap at them, hunting mindlessly as it crawled along the ground.

Drogon roared overhead, and she watched in anxious terror as he slammed into Viserion. Both dragons plummeted through the air to crash against the remains of the keep. The force of it leveled the rest of the structure, throwing wood and stone and flame high into the air. Debris whizzed by them at terrible speed.

She grabbed Ned and pulled him close, turning her body so that she would take the force of it. There was pain as stone peppered her from behind, and then warmth as fire rained down upon them. She could smell it burning her clothes as she held tight to Ned, and felt the boy clutching tight to her forearm in fear.

*It’s alright,* she wanted to tell him, but the words were ash in her mouth.

Another roar shattered the air around them, and she turned quickly to see Viserion shoot off into the sky at an impossible speed. Drogon moved to tear after him; the ground thudding under his steps as he stood in the flaming ruins of the keep, his wings outstretched to block the sky.

She released Ned and ran to an overturned cart, clambering up it to stand a little higher off the ground. Flames still licked at her shoulders and arms, eating away at her clothes, but she ignored it.

*“Come to me!”* she shouted, the Valyrian words ringing through the air. *“Drogon, come to me!”*

Her son answered her, but the roar was one of distress. Blue flame answered orange in the sky, and her chest tightened as she realized that her hold on Drogon at that moment was tenuous at best. He wanted to destroy Viserion, and would not stop until he had done so. She commanded him again, speaking the words aloud, pouring everything she had into it.

*Come to me. Help us.*

*Save us.*
Drogon roared again, and another dragon answered from the south.

Daenerys whipped her head around to see Rhaegal swoop in out of sky, surprising Viserion and tearing after him faster than she’d ever seen him fly. It distracted Drogon enough for him to hear her, and she saw him shift his gaze to the courtyard. A moment of eternity, and then he roared, loudly, and shot flame towards the breach in the wall. To slow the advance of the dead army.

Now was their chance - but where was Jon?

From the slightly raised position she scanned the courtyard for him.

“There!” Ned said, knowing exactly who she was searching for, pointing off to their left. Jon was fighting a group of wights on his own, the white handle of Longclaw flashing, and two more were coming up behind that he didn’t see. Quickly, she jumped off the cart from where she stood, the impact of hitting the ground only a dull pain in the haste of the moment. She grabbed her axe off the ground and clutched at it tightly as she ran to his aid, swinging it into the wight as hard as she could only a moment before it reached him. The force of her swing knocked the wight in half, as it was barely a being at all; only bone and rotted sinew. It screeched loudly and scrambled for her, arms grasping the snow in an effort to pull itself forward.

She brought the axe down again, severing the hand, but the wight still pressed on. The blue eyes focused on her with intensity, shining unnaturally bright as though a fire was lit inside them. Her skin crawled as they bore into her with unrelenting focus. Daenerys adjusted her grip on the handle to steel herself, determined to cut every bone in half if she had to.

A flash of steel, and the wight disintegrated before her. She looked up to see Jon staring at her, eyes wide. He was frozen only for a moment, as he soon rushed forward to begin extinguishing the flames that continued to make their way through her clothes. She’d forgotten about the fire.

As he smothered the flames on her left arm, he took it in his hands and brushed a thumb over the smooth, untouched skin, staring in disbelief. She said a silent prayer of thanks for the Northerners and their tendency for many layers; riding back to Winterfell without clothes was not something she was keen to do.

She called aloud for Drogon again, the Valyrian words coming out hoarse and stilted. Her son answered with a roar that shook her down to her bones, and she felt Jon’s hand on her arm tense slightly. Drogon thrust his wings down once, sending acrid smoke over them in a wave before he landed on the southern wall and crushed it to rubble.

“Come on,” she urged to Jon and Ned, and they followed her. The rush of terror had been a temporary balm to the pain of her injuries, but now each step brought it into clearer and clearer focus.

She just had to get onto Drogon. She had to fly them back.

Jon and Ned would die if she couldn’t -

Suddenly, Ned dropped out of her line of sight and she whirled around. The boy had fallen to his knees by a fallen soldier, tears flowing freely, grabbing the fastener of the man’s cloak and shaking him.

“Wake up!” she heard the boy plead. “Come with us!”

Jon hurried to them, and touched the boy’s shoulder. “I’m sorry Ned,” Daenerys heard him say. “I’m
sorry.”

Ser Darron lay there, dead, whether torn apart by debris or wights, she could not tell.

“Come on, Ned,” Jon urged, pulling gently at the boy’s shoulder. “We cannot linger.”

Ned didn’t seem to hear him, and suddenly there was silence. The sounds of fighting stopped. The world seemed too quiet, and for a moment Daenerys wondered if she’d lost the ability to hear. The air seemed to grow colder as they stood there, biting at her face and exposed skin.

Jon tried harder to pull Lord Umber upright. “Get up, Ned,” he said urgently. As the boy stood, Daenerys watched as the eyes of the master-at-arms shot open to reveal a bright, glowing blue. Ned screamed, and Jon picked the boy up just in time to get him out of reach of the wight’s clutches. “Run!” Jon shouted to her desperately. “Go!”

She didn’t need to be told twice. Each step sent white-hot agony through her body, but she didn’t stop until she reached Drogon.

As she approached she could see Drogon’s scales had been ripped and torn away in several long gashes, dark blood steaming in the cold. She felt them in her soul as if they had happened to her as well. *I’m sorry, my son*, she whispered, but it was all she could do. As long as he was able to fly them back, she would have to worry about these injuries later.

It was a struggle to climb up to her usual place behind his wings. Her hands shook as they struggled to grip his spikes, her breathing labored. It was an effort to remain focused, but she forced herself to concentrate.

*Come on, Dany.*

As she settled in, she looked behind her to see Jon lifting Ned to help him climb up, the boy terrified as he did so.

She offered a hand to help Ned settle in behind her. “Hold on tight,” she instructed. He nodded wordlessly and leaned forward to grip the spikes so hard his knuckles turned white. Jon pulled himself up behind them, close enough to Ned that he could steady the boy if he needed too.

Drogon pushed off with a great boom of his wings, roaring with anger and pain. In the distance, Rhaegal answered him.

*Fly, my son,* she urged to Drogon. *Fly us home to Winterfell.*

As they rose into the sky, Daenerys looked down and saw Last Hearth burning below them. Men still fought in the courtyard below. Tears stung her eyes.

*Fly, my son.*

*Fly us home to Winterfell.*
let me know what you guys think so far. this chapter was one of the scenes I first imagined when I had the idea for this story and I'm excited that I actually made it to this point lol.

currently attempting a Tyrion chapter to follow

thanks again for reading. and shout out again to my IRL friend for being awesome and helping make this story better.
Tyrion I

Chapter Summary

Tyrion awaits his queen's return to Winterfell.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Tyrion I

“She should have been back by now,” Tyrion said for the third time, casting the words out to the room at large.

Watching Daenerys disappear into the horizon was not the way he’d wanted to spend his first morning in Winterfell, and now that it was well into the darkness of evening he’d very nearly worn a hole in the floor of the Guest House with his pacing. All he could see in his mind was the black spot that was Drogon - and with it all his hopes and dreams for a better world - fading into the clouds.

“Perhaps Last Hearth is farther than she thought?” Missandei offered, trying to sound hopeful through her own concern. She and Grey Worm were seated on a small couch by the hearth, each clad in a heavy cloak despite being indoors.

“Drogon can fly the length of the continent in a day,” Tyrion replied, shaking his head. “It’s not the distance.” Silence greeted his words, and after another round of pacing through his usual route he continued. “The trouble is, we have no way of knowing where they are. Drogon could swoop down at any minute. Or, alternatively, if anything happened it could be a fortnight before we receive any kind of word from that far north.”

“I wonder if our hosts share your concern,” Varys asked, more out loud to the room than directly to him. He occupied a chair by the fire, wearing his usual neutral expression.

If only I had thought of that, Tyrion thought sarcastically to himself. Apart from a brief conversation with Sansa Stark that consisted of nothing more than the barest pleasantries - what did one talk about with their former child wife? - he’d not been able to gather any information regarding anything since the hurried council in her chambers before dawn. Northern lords had begun arriving late that morning, and it had been mutually agreed upon that Tyrion and the rest of the queen’s Small Council make themselves scarce until Jon Snow returned.

For what seemed like the hundredth time that day, he walked over to the door and opened it. Podrick was there, as calm and unaffected as ever.

“Can I assist you with anything, my lord?” the man asked. And he was surely a man now; the Podrick he’d known in King’s Landing wouldn’t have known what to do with a beard even if he’d been able to grow one. Now, like the Northerners, he’d begun to adopt a healthy growth of facial hair to keep the winter chill at bay. It added a number of years to his appearance and not necessarily in a bad way.

“Don’t suppose you’ve heard any dragons coming back this way?” Tyrion asked him, his tone a tad
sharper than it really needed to be.

To his credit, Podrick didn’t react to the attitude. “No, my Lord,” he said simply. “Would you like me to alert you when I do?”

“Yes, I would,” he replied, the tone of his voice softening. “Go ahead and seek your bed, Podrick,” he continued, dismissing him. “We shouldn’t have need of you any more tonight.”

“Very well, my lord.”

Tyrion shut the door, the metal lock engaging with a loud click, and made his way to the decanter of wine to pour himself a hefty glass.

Missandei was the only one to show any emotion, nervously fiddling with the hem of her cloak as she stared contemplatively into the fire. He realized that it wasn’t the one she’d had on the road, but new and beautifully embroidered.

“A gift,” she explained, noticing his gaze. “It was brought to me this morning.”

“The people of the North believe very strongly in being good hosts,” he said, settling himself in the chair next to Varys. “It’s a point of pride.”

Missandei smiled softly. “It is much appreciated.”

Tyrion looked at the three of them. “So what do you think of Winterfell?” he asked, more out of politeness than any real interest. The three of them had been out for most of the morning, and when they’d returned to the Guest House near midday there had been enough debate regarding their Queen’s departure that he’d forgotten to ask where they’d been.

“Cold,” was her response to his question after a brief but thoughtful pause. “And grey.”

“It’s not much better in the summer,” Tyrion replied, taking a drink and remembering the last time he’d been to this keep. “The Starks prefer function over beauty.”

“I like it,” Grey Worm said, expressionless, and with as much enthusiasm as one would use when talking about unremarkable weather or the color of sand.

“You will be interested to know that this morning we encountered a man named Sam Tarly,” Varys said, his tone pointed.

Tyrion blinked. “What?”

This insufferable man is telling him this now?

“He’s a man of the Night’s Watch, and a dear friend to the King in the North,” the Spider responded, each word he spoke making the situation worse and worse. Great. Just great. Another complicated political problem to add to the growing list of others waiting in the wings, ready to explode at the most inconvenient time. He’d nearly forgotten that Randyll Tarly had another son, his eldest, who’d decided to take the Black rather than inherit for reasons that weren’t hard to guess. In the dark dregs of his memory, he could vaguely recall the larger boy among the recruits at the Wall.

“Does he know?”

Varys shrugged. “I couldn’t tell you.”

Tyrion sighed. “I’m not sure if you could be less helpful if you tried.”
Varys only fixed him with an exasperated expression. To be honest, Tyrion wasn’t sure which outcome he preferred. He didn’t know enough about the man to guess at what would happen when the situation about his father came to light. Would he cause a rift? Would it affect the Queen’s ties to Jon Snow? All were questions he was unable to answer, and so he focused on the wine in his hand instead.

He took a long drink from his glass, pulling a face at the less desirable vintage. It wasn’t really a Northern specialty nor a preferred import - and thus he was stuck with a wine picked by someone who obviously didn’t actually drink wine. Nevertheless, he filled the glass back up again before setting the decanter down on the plain wooden table before him.

“You said that she was going to Last Hearth as a messenger?” Varys asked, turning the conversation back to the Queen.

“That was the intent,” Tyrion replied, frustration in his voice. “but as her Hand I am inclined to expect the worst.” He sighed. “And dangerous situations seem follow Jon Snow whether he intends for it or not. If she marries him, does that danger start to follow her too?”

“You had a proclivity to expect the worst before you became Hand,” Varys said pointedly, and with an air of impatience. “I’d rather hoped you’d start to see the silver lining in their situation by now.”

“And what, my Lord Spider, is that?” He couldn’t help the harsh note in his voice. Varys was a friend, in the loosest sense, but his definition of what was good news and what was bad tended to differ greatly depending on the day, and it was rare that such news aligned with Tyrion’s own particular interests. “Please, educate me.”

“Oh, don’t give me that,” the eunuch scoffed. “You can’t stop it. Any attempts to discourage it will likely be rather unsuccessful. You might as well use it to your advantage.”

“I’m not in the mood to work the riddle of your speech to find your point,” Tyrion said. “Just tell me what you mean to tell me so we can talk about something else.”

“All I’m saying is that it’s a fascinating story.”

“Your point?”

“My point is that it’s relatable. It humanizes her amongst the common people and that is something she sorely needs right now.”

“Yes, I can’t say her act of burning unarmed prisoners of war was particularly endearing.”

“And Cersei isn’t going to let people forget it.”

“So how do you solve that problem?”

“I’ve already begun.”

“And?”

Varys regarded him, a pointed glance at the near-empty glass in his hand. “And I’ve sent my little birds across the entire country, whispering the tale of Jon Snow and Daenerys Targaryen to anyone with half a willing ear. I’m sure there are some minor embellishments, but what’s a little tall tale between friends?”

Tyrion began to see where this was going. “I’m glad my anxiety has provided a foundation for your
propaganda campaign,” he responded dryly.

“Your anxiety provides no one anything,” Varys said. “Except to give you an excuse to wallow in your own misery.”

Point taken. “You don’t think it’s a bad idea?” he asked, frustrated. Was he the only one that saw the danger in this? “Their…entanglement on the cusp of war? What it could mean?”

“And what could it possibly mean, my Lord Hand, besides a secure alliance between our queen and the largest kingdom in Westeros? The chance to have a King at her side that cares more for the people he protects than his own ambition? A mutually beneficial arrangement on all sides, it seems. I’ve yet to understand your reluctance.”

“We came here all the way from Meereen with a plan. I just feel like she’s getting distracted.”

“Things rarely go according to plan.”

Tyrion felt a pressing need to roll his eyes at the platitude. “Yes, thank you for your wisdom,” he said sarcastically, reaching for the decanter to refill his glass. “The thought never occurred to me.”

The next day found him awake before daylight for the second day in a row, and still no word of Jon or Daenerys. His mind assumed the worst while a deep corner of his heart still clung to the last remaining shreds of hope he still had.

His prediction of the evening before had gone as planned. The four of them sat in silence mostly, though Missandei and Grey Worm occasionally spoke to each other in low voices and did not use the common tongue to do so. Varys retired early under the pretense of exhaustion, though it was more likely that he was going to feed his network of spies. Tyrion sat and stared at the fire, nursing several cups of wine, losing himself in his thoughts, counting each faint chime of the bells that tolled out the hours.

Now he found himself atop the northern wall, Podrick at his side, the dim colors of dawn breaking over the horizon.

He turned away with resignation to look back at the tall stone walls of Winterfell. Sansa Stark was there, clad in the simple dark colored dress that was very unlike anything she had worn in King’s Landing.

Tyrion let his gaze linger on her for a moment, allowing himself to appreciate the sight of his former wife, no longer a scared child amongst lions but a woman grown strong and confident through adversity. She met his gaze as she felt his eyes upon her, and she made a small beckoning gesture for him to join her.

“No sign of them?” Sansa’s voice was soft and muted as he approached her. Podrick took a couple steps to the side to give them privacy.

“Not yet, though I’ve only been here an hour.”

“I know,” Sansa said, handing him a mug of something warm to match the one she carried for herself. “Arya saw you come up here. I think she’s been up all night waiting.”

“To be honest, I’m surprised I managed to sleep at all. I don’t suppose you’re up here to tell me you’ve had word from them.”

“Unfortunately, no,” she replied. “I must have asked Bran a thousand times.”
“Could he tell you anything?” He tried not to sound too eager, but he needed any scrap of news the boy could give them.

“Only that he saw they had arrived. Nothing since. His...visions seem to be limited and it troubles him.”

They both fell into a worried silence. “How many of your lords arrived yesterday?” He asked her. Perhaps tackling some political problems would help distract them both.

“Nearly all,” she said. “Still awaiting word from a couple of the smaller Houses.”

“Any suggestions on how the Queen should address them?” He asked. “We could use any guidance you feel like offering.”

She raised an eyebrow. “You didn’t speak to Jon about that on your way here?”

“We did, often and at some length. But I’d like to know what you think we should do.”

She smiled at him. “Then if you don’t have something else to attend to, I would speak with you privately,” she said.

“I am at your disposal.” They stood a bit in silence. “Did you want to speak here or elsewhere?” he asked, feeling strangely awkward.

“We should speak in my study,” she murmured, looking down at him with a calculating expression. Something told him it wasn’t going to be a pleasant conversation. “I’ll have some food brought to us.”

“You have a study?” he asked as they began to walk back into Winterfell proper.

“I suppose it’s really Jon’s study,” she said. “It belonged to our father. Jon didn’t really use it before he left and I doubt he’ll suddenly find a use for it now.” Their footsteps crunched in the snow; his at a pace twice as frequent as hers. “He seems to be more affected by the memories that it holds than I.”

“I suspect he was a bit closer to your father, being the older one,” Tyrion acknowledged. “I know he thought very highly of him.”

Sansa pursed her lips a bit. “We all did.”

The tone of the conversation soured a bit at the mention of Ned Stark; still a hard topic to visit even after all these years. They walked along in silence, Podrick keeping a close but respectful distance behind them. The whole parade of it was a strange but familiar feeling, and he thought with fondness on the memories of walking with Sansa through the gardens of King’s Landing. Podrick would walk faithfully behind them, as he listened to her enthusiastic observations on court gossip and the delightful excitement it brought her.

Here, however, there was no such delight. Only a solemn, quiet march through to a simple wooden door and the stone steps behind it. He noticed the strange stares of the people as they passed them, and he wondered if there were any Winterfell residents left that remembered the last time he’d been to this keep.

It seemed like a lifetime ago.

“The beard suits you.”
The comment from Sansa was unexpected and pulled him up sharply from his inner musings. “You think so?” It was all he could think to respond, brushing his fingers along it absentmindedly. “It makes you seem much older than you are.” “That makes sense. I feel much older than I am.”

He followed her down a serious looking stone hallway and paused as she pushed opened a heavy wooden door to their right. “A lot has happened to both of us in our time apart,” she acknowledged, gesturing him inside. It was a modest room. Most of the space was taken up by a large wooden desk with parchment of various sizes strewn across it. Behind her, a window displayed the tops of the Godswood, still bright and green despite the snows. “Yes, a lot has happened,” she replied, sitting himself in one of the plain wooden chairs as she crossed around to the other side of the desk. Podrick remained outside, closing the door behind her with a quiet snap of iron and wood. “You kill your father, disappear, and resurface on the other side of the world as hand to Daenerys Targaryen.” She steepled her long fingers together. “An interesting story.”

He picked at an imperfection on the arm of the chair. “Interesting?” he repeated. “Maybe. It didn’t seem interesting as it was happening. I’d probably use a different word...or perhaps several that are all too crass to utter in polite company.” A shadow of a smile flickered at the corners of her mouth. He pressed on, consumed with the need to fill the silence. “I’m not sure why, but both my brother and Lord Varys seemed to deem me worthy of rescuing. If not for them I would have died horribly by my sister’s will years ago.”

“Daenerys Targaryen seems to find some value in you, if she made you her Hand.” “Despite the rumors and the family name, I find her to be quite reasonable in many respects,” Tyrion offered truthfully. “She wants to leave the world better than she found it.” “An admirable cause.” “I think you might like her.” “You do?” He shrugged. “Or perhaps I’m off the mark. It has been some time since you and I have spoken, and I’m not going to claim that I knew you well enough then to assume your thoughts on anything.”

She was silent for a moment. A knock on the door echoed sharply in the room, and a handmaiden entered with a tray of bread and jam and soft-boiled eggs, and he thought he smelled a rasher of bacon there as well. “I apologize for the sparse fare,” Sansa murmured as the handmaiden left, reaching for the brown bread and tearing off a slice. She handed it to him. “We can’t afford to be too extravagant in winter.”

He took the bread from her, still warm from the ovens and smelling delightful. “You’ll find no complaint from me,” he said, reaching for the handle of the sturdy mug closest to him. “I understand what the hospitality must cost.” He meant both the keep lodging and the extra burden that Daenerys’ armies would put upon the hunting yield of the surrounding land.
“Save my home, Tyrion,” Sansa said seriously, looking him dead in the eye. “Save my home and my people and I daresay you will be hard-pressed to find anyone here that would not support your Queen against Cersei.”

“You think so?” He took a sip of the mug’s contents. A bitter, Northern ale - not to his taste, perhaps, but better than nothing.

“I do...provided we are strategic about my brother’s fondness for your Queen.”

He almost choked on his second sip of the ale. So they had come to the crux of it; the damned love story threatening the success of their tenuous alliance.

“What has Jon told you?” he asked carefully. He wasn’t sure what he should reveal; he wanted to trust Sansa, but she had spent a significant amount of time in the past years with Littlefinger as her only influence, and Tyrion liked to think he was smart enough to avoid whatever remaining claws that disease of a man had wrought upon the world.

“Enough,” she replied, take a sip from her own mug. “I know that he loves her.”

He sighed. “And you must know by now that it is reciprocated.” After all, Daenerys had all but stated her intentions in Sansa’s sitting room only that morning.

“Whether they love each other or not is not what concerns me,” she replied. “It happened, and there’s nothing we can do about it now. They should marry, and soon.”

“You think that’s a good idea?”

She regarded him with a hard, calculating gaze. “The North needs security and assurances,” she said. “Jon can advocate for her all he wants, but they won’t have time to get to know her. All they see is another Targaryen bent on conquering them in a quest for their own power.”

He had to admit, the perception of her campaign was not a great one. Westeros did not see her as a great liberator liked they’d hoped when they’d sailed across the Narrow Sea, especially as the details regarding the battle of Blackwater Rush became widely known.

Perhaps Varys had the right idea.

“Jon has the reputation and good will that she needs,” Sansa continued, spreading jam across a slice of bread with steady precision. “His name is known through most of Westeros. I’m sure you’ve heard the rumors.”

“I’ve heard a number of things,” he admitted. There were quite a few stories about the King in the North, some easy to believe and some...not. He wasn’t sure if he was quite ready to take stock in any of them, as word of mouth was a notoriously unreliable way of spreading any sort of truth. Men would swear up and down to the Old Gods and the New Gods and the Drowned God and the Lord of Light that their truth was the real truth, and he found it much easier to only believe what he could feel and touch and see with his own eyes. There was much less disappointment that way.

He certainly wasn’t going to believe that Jon Snow took a literal knife in the heart for anyone and lived to tell about it.

However, Sansa Stark and Lord Varys seemed to have developed the same opinion about the situation, and that seemed to soothe some of his fears. Perhaps it wouldn’t be the disaster he anticipated.
They ate a bit in silence, and Tyrion let himself savor the hearty flavor of the bacon and bread. It had been nothing but hardtack rations since Dragonstone and the sparsely flavored meat was a blessing in comparison.

“‘I was thinking...’” Sansa started, regarding him with a calculating stare, but her thought was cut off by a thunderous roar that rattled the windows and shook him down to his bones.

Drogon.

Tyrion stood up immediately, and Sansa followed, dashing around her desk to pull open the door. He followed back the way they had come earlier, and the dark shadow of the dragon passed over them just as they ran out onto the northern wall. He saw the familiar flash of silver hair as it passed, and he nearly fell down with relief. Only...

“Is that...blood?” Sansa asked quietly, pointing to a dark wet spot that had splashed onto the wall to their left.

The dark red-black of dragon blood steamed on the cold stone, and his heart sank. He whirled around to track Drogon as he landed hard onto the northern moors, falling to the side and carving a huge swath in the snow, throwing his passengers from him.

The dragon roared again, loud and terrible.

Tyrion stared hard at the distant figure of Daenerys, still and unmoving in the snow.

Chapter End Notes

thanks everyone for all your nice comments on the last couple of chapters. planning a drama fest coming up, hopefully it’s as exciting here as it is in my head lol

as always, let me know what you guys think. and thanks for reading.
The Great Hall was filled with the low murmur of tense voices.

Arya sat at the end of a high table, trying hard to look calm and unaffected, but the nervous fidgeting of her fingers against the table probably betrayed her true emotions. She was dimly aware of Bran at the table with her, but she’d only spared a glance out of the corner of her eye as he’d arrived and nothing more. She was too focused on the situation before her. Blood ran loud in her ears from her pounding heart. Give her an enemy, a thing to defeat, and she was calm. Cool. In control. But at the high table, alone? The place where her father had stood? She wished she was doing anything else.

Brienne stood against the wall nearby, watching the group as the lords began to take their seats. She had been the one to come to her with Sansa’s request that Arya stay here and keep order, even though Arya hadn’t the slightest clue how to do either of those things. Sansa was the leader here, not her. She was the one that lurked in the back, the second sister, the one that didn’t have to worry about the whims and wishes of the bannermen. She liked it that way. It was easier to watch them when they weren’t constantly trying to get her attention.

As much as Sansa loved to boss people around she couldn’t do it all herself; not with the hectic preparations of having three armies and a large keep to prepare for war. So in a moment of sisterly affection and weakness, Arya had offered to help.

She regretted that now.

“Where is the king?” Lord Glover asked brusquely as he entered, his ward and a few of his men trailing behind. He regarding Arya with a hard gaze. What would Sansa do? she thought nervously, before settling on returning his same hard expression. You’re in charge, remember. You’re in charge.

“He is on his way here,” she finally replied, hoping it was true. The chaotic spectacle of her brother’s return was, after all, the reason they were all gathering.

“Is it true that he bent the knee to the Targaryen girl?” he asked, spitting the word Targaryen as if it were a curse.

Arya stared at the man with a dispassionate eye. “I would not put your trust in rumors, my Lord,” she said finally, trying to address the man the way she thought Sansa would. “He has not said anything to me of that nature.” She hoped that was diplomatic enough. It seemed to satisfy Lord Glover,
however, and he sat down. It wasn’t technically a lie; of course she knew her brother bent the knee but he had, in fact, neglected to actually tell her that himself.

_**Hurry up, Sansa.**_

The minutes that passed felt like hours, and the longer she sat the more she worried that _actual_ hours may pass before they heard anything.

Arya hated not knowing what was going on. She resumed her nervous fidgeting, scraping at the side of the table with her thumbnail.

Outside, Drogon roared. It was a sustained, angry sound that seemed a lot closer than it was. A few people rushed to the windows to look out, trying to catch a glimpse, but more seemed to shudder in fear.

“That is the sound of our end,” Bronze Yohn Royce snapped angrily, his voice carrying over the room like thunder. His armor gleamed in the light from the windows. “Jon Snow has brought ruin upon the North by bringing dragons here and I will not be party to it.”

Arya had neither Sansa’s calm nor her patience for this sort of thing, but if her sister thought that would be a problem then she should never have put Arya in charge. She stood up suddenly, anger rising within her.

“Lord Royce, if you intend to break faith with my sister then have the good manners to do so to her directly!” She hurled the words across the room with passion. To have them stand there and disparage her family was not something she was willing to tolerate. “Jon would not have brought Daenerys Targaryen here if he did not believe that it would be for the good of the North.”

“I am not of the North,” Yohn Royce replied, his voice stiff. “I am here out of respect for the Lady of Winterfell and nothing more.”

“Then I suggest you take up your allegiances with Sansa some other time,” she snapped as the doors opened.

The angry voices that filled the Hall began to silence, dissipating into hushed whispers.

Arya remained standing, unable to tear her eyes from what she saw. Sansa was there, and Tyrion, and with them was Jon and Daenerys, covered in blood and ash and other gruesome signs of battle.

A battle that wasn’t supposed to have happened.

Ned Umber was there as well; at least, that’s who she assumed the boy to be. He walked with a slight limp but kept his head forward and expression firm, parting from the group only to take a place near Lyanna Mormont.

Maester Wolkan followed him at Jon’s wordless gesture and began to look the boy over carefully. Jon, Daenerys and Sansa approached the high table.

“Close your mouth and _sit down_,” Sansa hissed in her ear as she passed around to take the seat next to Bran. Arya blinked and did as she was told, suddenly realizing that she wore the same shocked face as everyone in the room.
She couldn’t tear her eyes away.

Daenerys took the seat next to her and the place in the middle of the table was left for Jon. However, he remained standing, leaning forward slightly with his hands placed upon the back of the chair. Arya could see blood had dried in streaks across his temple and down his neck. Stray tendrils of hair fell into his face and ash dusted his clothes. She saw him take a breath, and when he spoke, his voice was measured but rough, as if he’d swallowed sand.

“My lords, I apologize for my appearance but I’m afraid I have some news that cannot wait,” he said, his words carrying effortlessly across the silent hall. “A few days ago, I received word that the Wall had been destroyed at Eastwatch-by-the-Sea, and that the Night King and his army had crossed through.” He paused and took another breath before continuing. The entire room was hanging on his every word. “Yesterday, they arrived at Last Hearth...and destroyed it.”

A collective gasp and related mutterings ran through the Hall and Arya glanced at Lord Umber, sitting still and quiet. He did not look up to meet anyone’s eyes.

“It was through the efforts of Queen Daenerys that we were able to warn them with enough time to send most south to safety.” Arya didn’t miss the hitch in his tone as he said ‘most,’ and she could see the sorrow reflected clearly in his face.

Where Sansa kept her thoughts behind a careful mask, Jon now wore them openly for all to see.

“How could you bring a Targaryen here?” Another lord’s voice rose clear above the general noise. Arya couldn’t see who it was. “After what her father and brother did to your family?”

Daenerys didn’t even react to the accusation, remaining still in her chair. Jon’s demeanor stiffened noticeably, and he turned to face the lord with frustration. “I believe a similar conversation took place in this Hall before I left,” Jon said, the very tone of his voice a threat. “I do not hold Ned Umber accountable for his father’s betrayal, nor will I judge Daenerys for events that happened before she was born. There is a war upon us, my Lords, and she brings her armies and her dragons to fight beside us. To fight for you.” He paused before continuing, his voice softer. “We will not survive without her.”

Arya could tell that some of them were not convinced. Despite the horror of Jon’s appearance, the clear signs of truth in his devastation, the news that Last Hearth had been completely destroyed...the idea that an army of dead men marched towards them was still a hard concept to grasp.

“And what are we giving her in return?” Lord Cerwyn spoke this time, his words cutting through the silence.

Arya looked quickly to her brother. He looked down at the table and seemed to be preparing himself. She tensed, waiting for the inevitable truth to come out. He’d bent the knee to save their lives, but the lords that were present here wouldn’t understand. They were proud, too proud, to see that who they claim as an enemy is in fact, not an enemy at all. Her hands clenched tightly to the sides of her chair.

“I-” He started to address the question, but it was Daenerys who spoke instead.

“You want to know if your King offered me something in return for my help?” she replied, her voice strong and clear. “A fair question.”
Silence filled the Hall as they waited for her to continue. It was tense and anticipatory.

“I did not make the decision to come here with the aim to get something out of it for myself,” she continued, each word chosen deliberately and carefully. “I saw the threat you face and could not, in good conscience, leave you to fight it alone.”

“You expect us to believe you’re doing this because it’s right?”

“I do. Is it so hard to believe?” Daenerys looked out at the room as she moved to stand. Arya saw that she used the table to steady herself. “I am not my father, nor do I have the ambition to be. By all accounts I’ve heard he deserved his fate. My appearance before you now should be proof enough that I’m serious.”

As she spoke, Arya could see that there was a fresh red streak across the hand the held the table, bright against her skin. She was still bleeding. Jon noticed it too, his brows furrowed in concern. Daenerys remained impassive, her face smooth, betraying no pain.

“I don’t care why you’re here,” Yohn Royce said. “I will not bend the knee to another Targaryen.”

“You mistake me, my Lord, but I have not asked you to,” Daenerys said.

“Is that not why we have gathered?” he challenged. “So you can save the North and ask us to bend the knee in return?”

“You have been asked here because war is upon us,” Jon said. “We are out of time and out of options. We need to prepare, and I need your assurances that you will work together with the armies from the south to protect our people.”

Lyanna Mormont stepped forward, standing not much taller than the men seated around her. Her eyes were set in a fierce, determined stare. “Your Grace, it was my call to action that crowned you King,” she said, regarding Jon with intensity. “I did not do so lightly.”

“I did not take it so.”

“If you truly believe that this is the best path for the North, then House Mormont stands with you,” she said. “My uncle saw something in you, and our family’s sword sits at your side. I will not break that faith, not as long as I lead my House.”

Jon nodded to her, his eyes grateful at the show of loyalty. Ned Umber jumped up beside Lyanna, wincing a bit as he did so. Dried blood stood out like a dark streak against the sandy color of his hair, crusting about his ear and jaw.

“House Umber stands with you as well,” the boy said fiercely. Though his eyes were red rimmed, he showed no tears. “And with Daenerys Targaryen. There would be no House Umber if not for you.” His face shone with gratitude. “What you did for us, for me - I will spend my life doing what I can to repay you.”

“This is all well and good, but neither of them remember what it was like under the Mad King,” Lord Glover said angrily, speaking before Daenerys or Jon could say anything in response. “Lord Umber is not even old enough to remember the man he was named for.”

“Lord Umber has just as much right to speak here as you,” Jon said, his voice low. A warning. “And you will show him the respect his title commands.” The older lord did not seemed cowed by the rebuke, but after a long moment Lord Glover sat down, a wordless gesture of acquiescence under protest.
“It doesn’t matter what our father would have thought or not,” Sansa said, her voice sharp and carrying over the crowd. “He’s dead. You have his children before you. You named his son your king for a reason; does the North truly have no loyalty that it’s lords break faith at their whim?”

“We did not lose fathers and sons and brothers fighting against the Targaryens just to be ruled by one again,” Lord Glover responded. “If we support her, then what did they die for?”

“What does any man die for?” Sansa countered. “Are the lives of those who died in Robert’s Rebellion worth more than those who have fallen in the path of Cersei’s destruction? Are they worth more than the living children here now? They will not see spring again unless we put aside old grudges and work together to fight a common enemy.”

“The time for old grudges has passed,” Jon added. “All it does is weaken us. If we are divided amongst ourselves then we will have lost before the fight ever comes to our gates. House Stark and House Targaryen were allies for centuries before my grandfather went south, and I wonder why your calls to loyalty seem to forget that part of our history?” He sighed, frustrated. “There were Starks and Targaryens long before the Mad King and I hope that there will be Starks and Targaryens and Mormonts and Glovers and Karstarks long after we are gone from this world. With every breath I aim to secure that future for us, but I cannot do it alone. I am asking you to trust me.”

The words seemed to have their intended effect. Dissenting murmurs were replaced by a sullen silence.

After a long moment, Jon spoke again. “I have brought dragonglass back with me,” he continued. “We need to work on fashioning it into arrowheads, spearpoints, and daggers. I need good riders to volunteer for ranging trips so we can track the progress of his army and we’ll need builders to assist with reinforcing our defenses.” His words rolled over a silent group.

“We can meet again tomorrow,” Sansa said, loud enough for the lords to hear, but in a quieter voice she addressed their brother. “Please Jon, go and rest. I’ll stay here and speak with them.” He looked like he was going to protest, but Sansa wouldn’t let him. “They’re my people too, Jon. Let me help you. You don’t have to do this alone.”

After a moment, Jon relented. “Tomorrow,” he said in confirmation, before moving to depart the Hall. Daenerys followed, and Arya looked down the table at her sister.

“Go on,” Sansa murmured to her, bidding her to follow Jon. Arya didn’t wait to be told twice; dashing up and hurrying along after them.

“That was about as successful as we could have hoped,” Tyrion was saying dryly as Arya caught up with the group on the breezeway. Jon and Daenerys stood together, and the queen turned to face her Hand in exasperation.

“An apt observation,” she said, her tone indicating that she wasn’t keen on conversing. Away from the Hall and the lords, she looked paler, weaker, diminished. Footsteps echoed on the wooden planks, and Arya turned to see the rest of Daenerys’ advisors walking up to join them, Missandei in the lead.

“I only mean to point out that you neglected to mention a key issue. Jon Snow bent the knee to you, and so you are their queen. All of the debate about bending the knee was a moot point.”
“Tyrion’s right,” Jon added, his voice soft as he looked at Daenerys. “Why did you stop me?”

She took a deep breath and placed a hand on the railing of the breezeway to steady herself. “I have given it a great deal of thought,” she said to both of them. “And I realize that there is no point to it. Forcing myself on them as their queen is something Cersei would do. I am not here to conquer. I am here to help.” She paused for a moment as if to collect her thoughts.

“Your Grace, you should rest,” Missandei murmured, a worried look plain on her face. “Lord Tyrion can speak with you later—”

Daenerys shook her head in a polite dismissal. “I’m alright for now,” she said, before turning to her Hand again. “I can help more effectively without a third of our forces in active dissent. They named a king, they will follow their king, and I see no reason for that to change at present. Besides,” she continued. “I prefer for Jon and I to marry as equals and to remain so afterwards.”

The remark was said so casually that Arya thought she’d misheard. She vaguely remembered Sansa had said something the day before about Jon marrying Daenerys, but until now she hadn’t realized it was more than just speculation on her sister’s part. It was real. Part of her was shocked; it was hard to imagine Jon marrying anyone. She looked between the two, looking for clues, wondering what Sansa could clearly see but she could not.

Tyrion seemed to be both resigned and annoyed. “It’s a very noble offer,” he replied. “Though the North is certainly getting quite a bit out of this deal. Two armies and two dragons to fight alongside them. And at the end of it all, a Northern King on the Iron Throne. What more will you let them take from you?”

Daenerys got angry at him now, fire burning back into her eyes. Arya couldn’t help but be intimidated at the sight of her, fearsome in her burned and ruined clothes, ash and soot and dried blood in her face and hair. “How can you think of the Iron Throne now?” she asked, voice strained. “None of that matters, don’t you see? That damned chair might as well be back in Meereen for all the thought I intend to give it until the people here are safe!” Her breathing was ragged and labored, as if it took all of her effort to remain upright.

“Daenerys—” Jon started, taking a step towards her. He started to wrap an arm about her waist in support. “We can talk about all of this later.”

“I—”

Arya watched, frozen in place, as Daenerys began to crumple. Jon only just managed to catch the queen in time as she fell into him, limp and still, her head back and face pale.

“Daenerys!” Jon called urgently for her, eyes wide with worry, but she did not respond. “Daenerys!” Quickly, he pulled her up into his arms to carry her.

“Get the maester,” he said, his tone clipped and urgent, and one of the bannermen standing nearby turned immediately to head back towards the Hall.

“Take her to my room,” Arya said suddenly, moving forward to lead the way. “It’s the closest.”

She didn’t know exactly why she made the offer, only that it made more sense than Jon carrying the queen all the way out to the Guest House. She supposed there was some sort of sudden familial emotion at work as well; after all, she just found out Daenerys was to be her brother’s wife.

Taking the turn sharply, she skidded to a stop in front of her door and flung it open. Jon was right behind her, holding Daenerys close. He laid her down on the bed gently. The darkness of the furs
were a dramatic contrast to the queen’s features, making her look as colorless and pale as the snow outside the window.

Tyrion and Missandei followed them inside, and as Jon pulled back from Daenerys they all saw a streak of fresh blood across the front of him, glossy and bright against the dark leather. Missandei gasped just as Jon caught sight of it, and he leaned forward to throw the cloak back.

“Why didn’t you say something?” Arya heard him murmur desperately, his face pained as he looked down at the wound. He cared deeply for her, and there it was, written plainly across his face. She could feel her heart breaking for him, and as she stood there she wrestled desperately with the agonizing feeling of not knowing what to do to help.

Jon pulled out the knife at his belt and cut through the leather straps of the cloak with a swift motion. He pulled the cloak out from under her with a careful motion and tossed it to the ground. The wound was serious, a jagged line from hip to mid thigh. Blood had soaked through, clotted, and opened to soak through again, matting her clothes to her skin. Tyrion stared at it, eyes hard and angry.

Hurried footsteps announced the arrival of the maester. A young maid and Gilly followed him in, and after one look at the Queen he began issuing instructions before turning to Jon.

“Your Grace -“

“I’m alright, see to me when you are done here,” Jon said quietly. His eyes never left Daenerys, and as he stood his hand lingered in hers just for a moment before he pulled away.

Arya and Tyrion followed him out, leaving Missandei to watch over her queen. As soon as the door closed, Tyrion turned to regard Jon with anger.

“I knew this would very well be the death of one of you but I didn’t think it would be so soon!” Tyrion snapped.

Jon whirled to face him, era flashing in anger. “You are blaming me for this?” he asked, his voice low and almost a growl. Covered in blood and ash himself, his eyes wide with fear and stress, he looked positively feral.

“I think she takes unnecessary risks on your behalf, yes,” Tyrion replied carefully, seeming to calm his tone with great effort. “I believe I made that concern clear some time ago.”

“If you think I have undue influence over what she decides to do then you are quite mistaken.”

“You’re telling me that it’s not her love for you that encouraged her to go north?”

“She was going to fly up there anyway regardless of what counsel either you or I would give her,” Jon replied. “It is her own mind that made that choice.” He sighed, leaning back hard against the wall. “I went to protect her.”

“Yes, what a stellar job you have done.”

Jon looked like he was about to strike him down where he stood, but the dwarf stood his ground. After a long, tense, moment Tyrion sighed, his shoulders drooping low. An unspoken apology. “She does not think of herself when others are in danger.”

“No, she does not,” her brother replied, his tone clipped and angry.

“But, like it or not, she does listen to you,” Tyrion pressed. “Why didn’t you leave sooner?”
“You don’t think I tried? It’s not like I could fly the dragon home myself!” Jon snapped, exasperated. His hand clenched and unclenched at his side.

“I’m not sure yelling at each other over fault is going to do much for her right now,” Arya interrupted, looking between the two men and tired of the argument. Tyrion glanced over at her as if he had forgotten she was there. “The last thing she’s going to want to do when she recovers is deal with a couple of idiots squabbling about things that can’t be changed.”

“You make us sound like children,” Tyrion murmured, though it was also a grudging acknowledgment of her accuracy.

“Try not to act like children and I’ll take care not to confuse the term with you again,” she said icily, not sure where the admonishment came from but certain it was probably due to spending so much time with Sansa the past few months. It sounded like something she would say.

She let the words hang in the air a moment before she moved forward to comfort her brother. He looked defeated and exhausted, the dim light in the hallway making the scars on his face more pronounced. “She’s strong, she’ll be alright,” she said, placing a hand on his arm. She could see exhaustion lining his face. It made him seem much older than he was. “You should go and get yourself cleaned up,” she said to him softly. “And get some rest.”

“I’m not going anywhere.”

“Please, Jon,” she urged. “I’ll stay here with her. I’m sure she’d want you to take care of yourself.”

It took a long moment, but Jon finally relented by letting out an exhausted breath. Eventually, he and Tyrion both left in separate directions, and Arya stood alone in the hall.

It couldn’t be much past midday, but it felt like she’d lived a thousand lifetimes since she’d woken that morning.

Quietly, she turned the knob to re-enter her room. Missandei sat out of the way, looking on with worry and concern. The cloak Jon had cut away was now folded neatly in her lap - well, folded as best as the ragged remains of it could be. The woman held tightly onto it as if the garment were made of the most precious material.

“It is one of her most treasured possessions,” the Missandei explained quietly when she caught Arya looking at it. “It didn’t seem right to leave it on the floor.”

“We can find her a new one,” Arya offered. The cloak itself was fine craftsmanship to be sure, but in the North it had many equals.

“This one is special,” she replied quietly. “It was a gift.”

Chapter End Notes
so there was a hang up on getting this chapter out and I'd like to send a shoutout to my anxiety for constantly making me think everything I write is terrible.

like seriously this is draft 4782649834756

so thanks for tolerating my long and infrequent updates. i appreciate everyone that takes the time to read and leave comments.
Jon IV

Chapter Summary

Jon asks Bran a question and immediately regrets it.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Jon IV

“Your Grace, I need you to hold still,” Maester Wolkan said, a gentle admonishment as he braced his hands against Jon’s left arm. It ached, half swollen from bruising that was already gaining a dark purple tint, and a jagged wound stood out in an angry line across the length of it. He couldn’t remember how it happened; another scar in an ever-growing list.

The rest of his more serious injuries had been taken care of over the course of the past hour or so. A blow to the side of his head from exploding stone. Bruised ribs and a sprained knee from being tossed into the snow by Drogon. A cut to his jaw from a wight.

It was just getting on towards the middle of the afternoon and the events of the last couple of days were starting catch up with him hard. He was exhausted; yet his body felt like it was wound tight like a bow string. Tense. Anxious. Over and over in his mind, all he could see was Last Hearth blasting apart. The Dead swarming through the gap in the wall. Daenerys, on fire and eyes alight, screaming to the sky in a language he didn’t understand.

Daenerys again, still and pale in Arya’s room.

His throat felt dry and swallowing was difficult.

“Here, lad,” the low voice of Ser Davos brought him out of his spiraling thoughts. His advisor offered him a flagon of ale and Jon took it gratefully, drinking a good bit of it before setting it down on the table beside him. “I can try and find you something stronger if you like.”

“Perhaps later,” Jon murmured, trying to take a deep breath and failing. A sharp pain told him the maester had begun sewing up the wound on his arm and he tried not to watch. “Do you have any news for me?” he asked, hoping the older man would be able to distract him. He’d stayed with Sansa as she spoke with the lords in the Hall, and Jon was keen to know what had happened after he’d left.

Davos sighed and settled back into his chair. “I believe the status of your lords is mixed,” he said. “The younger ones are on your side. Mormont. Umber. Cerwyn. And of course, Lord Manderly spoke in the queen’s favor.” Jon took another long drink of the ale. “Lord Glover is your main hold out against her and has a bit of a following from some of the smaller Houses in his part of the country. And Lord Royce continues to be antagonistic as well.”

“Could we afford to lose them?” Jon asked. “The men from the Vale?”

His advisor shrugged, adjusting his position in the chair. “It’s hard to say. On one hand, what’s a few hundred riding knights when we have twenty thousand Dothraki? But if they leave, I’m afraid it would embolden others to do the same. Not good for morale or maintaining numbers.”
Jon sighed. The breath ended with a wince as he felt thread and needle tugging at his skin. He regretted dismissing Davos’ offer to find something stronger than ale. “So what do you think I should do about it?”

The older man sighed. “I don’t know if you can do much at all at present,” he mused. “But it would probably be best if you set about tasks as soon as possible. Give them something to do so that they don’t have time to dissent too strongly.”

“I don’t suppose you and Sansa could get that started?” Jon was so tired that his mind was barely hanging on to the conversation. Organizing anything before tomorrow felt as impossible as trying to touch the moon.

“Of course, your Grace.”

The maester finished the stitches on his arm and wrapped it. He then gave stern instructions that Jon was not to do any lifting or fighting until it had healed before leaving the room.

Ser Davos regarded him with a compassionate eye as Jon pulled the sleeve of his shirt back down over his forearm with care. “Get some rest,” he said kindly, a hand coming down to pat him gently on the shoulder as he rose.

And then Jon was alone.

In his mind, the Dead reached for him. Bony, desiccated fingers grasping at the air, wanting nothing more than to rip him apart, to make him one of them. Then Daenerys appears, smashing the Dead with a broken axe, saving his life. He sees the anger and fear in her eyes, the blood on her hands and face, the warring emotions that filled a person in the heat of a fight. He could see her, strong, brave, pulling Ned Umber up onto Drogon.

Standing before the Northern lords as unbreakable as stone.

Falling into his arms, unable to stand.

He downed the last of the ale in an effort to dispel the despair that threatened to consume him. Maester Wolkan had assured him that he believed Daenerys would fully recover, but it was hard to take the maester at his word when the memory of her collapse remained so fresh in his mind.

With a wince, Jon stood up walked slowly to the door, doing his best to keep off his injured knee. He slid the locking bolt closed. Exhaustion pulled at him like a weight dragging him down into the floor with each step he took towards the bed. As he crawled on top of the dark furs, he stared at the space at his side and for a brief, melancholy moment before he slipped into a heavy sleep.

Several hours had passed when he woke again. It was well into the night judging by the darkness through his window and the low embers of the fire in the corner. His mind was clearer but his body was stiff and his various injuries protested greatly when he tried to rise.

Bare feet touched the warm stone of the floor and he leaned forward onto his knees with a heavy sigh, one hand brushing the hair back from his face as he did so. He let out a long breath before he reached down gingerly to pull on his boots. It was too late in the night to expect anyone to be awake, and the thought of empty halls appealed to him. He decided to wander down to the kitchens and see what he could find as food had been another thing that had fallen by the wayside in the past couple
of days.

It would be quiet walk down the familiar halls of his home, and then back to sleep again until daybreak.

He didn’t bother dressing further as he was not expecting to encounter anyone. The tunic he wore laced up enough to conceal the scar across his chest and the heated walls kept the winter chill at bay enough that a cloak wouldn’t be necessary. A brief glance through the mirror in his wardrobe was all the care he gave to his appearance - leaving his hair free from its usual tie - before departing his room.

He was on his way back, tankard of ale in one hand and half a loaf of brown bread in the other when something caught his eye.

The door to Bran’s room was cracked open, and a thin sliver of light from the fire spilled its way out into the hall. As he approached, he began to hear the quiet murmur of voices inside. What was his brother doing awake at this time of night?

“I saw the same thing,” Bran was saying as Jon approached the door, which was overlarge and newly fitted to accommodate the wheeled chair. “The same spirals, over and over.”

“What were they made out of?” Sam Tarly’s voice was a surprise.

“More of the same,” Bran replied. “Stone. Trees.” A pause, and then, “...people.”

“Did you see the Children of the Forest?”

“No, not this time.”

There was a long pause, and Jon heard the faint scrape of quill on parchment. “Let’s try once more,” Sam said after several moments. “This time I think you should try and focus on the spirals again, but concentrate on whichever one comes to you the clearest. See if you can find how how they’re made, and why.”

“Alright.”

Jon wondered briefly if he should leave them be and go back to his room, making a note to ask them about this later. However, his curiosity was too strong and it overpowered that thought quickly. He used his foot to nudge the door open a little wider.

Sam noticed the movement immediately, his face turning towards the door in surprise. “Jon! What are you doing awake at this hour?”

“I could ask the same of the two of you,” Jon replied, entering the room fully and pushing the door closed behind him with a soft click of the latch. He glanced at Bran, his chair placed near the fire, eyes a cloudy white as he stared forward into nothing.

“Because of his, well, visions, Bran tends to keep strange hours,” Sam explained. “I like to help him when I can. Writing down what he sees, asking questions to help him focus.” He paused. “And I think it helps him keep his mind straight as well. I imagine it’s a...hard thing to control, what he can do.”

Jon noted that parchment and ink were scattered about, denoting the frequency and expectation of these sorts of meetings, and pushed a stool across the floor with his foot to take up a place on the other side of Sam’s desk. He sat with a slight wince as his injuries protested vehemently against it,
and leaned against the warm stone behind him.

Sam looked at him. “Do you want me to find something for you?” he asked, concerned. “To help with the pain?”

Jon shook his head. “This has been doing alright for now,” he said, raising the ale slightly. “I’ve recovered from worse.”

They settled into an easy silence while the fire crackled a bit in the hearth. Jon looked over the table at the parchment stacked about in haphazard piles. One in particular caught his eye, and he pulled it out for a clearer view. A seven-pronged spiral shape, the lines extending out in a left-leaning curve from a central point.

He’d seen this before.

“I saw this symbol at Dragonstone,” he said, pointing to it. “In the dragonglass cave. There were similar drawings all over the walls.”

Sam looked at him, wide-eyed with curiosity. “Really?” He asked, pulling out a fresh sheet of parchment. “What else did you see there?”

Jon went on to describe what he could remember: the spiral shape, a circle with a line extending downward through it, rough drawings of figures that were clearly White Walkers. “The library at Dragonstone was not extensive; not much survived Stannis’ occupation,” he continued. “I read what I could. I think that the Children of the Forest made them, but I could be wrong.”

Sam shuffled through some of the papers on the desk. “No, no, I think you’re right,” he said, almost excitedly. “Bran has seen some visions of the Children. They made the symbols you saw in places all over Westeros: from Dorne to the far North beyond the Fist of the First Men,” he said. “It’s clearly important. What we haven’t figured out yet is what they mean.”

“Is there anything in the library here that could be of use?”

“Yes, more than most,” he said. “I’ve read through a few things when I’ve had time. Also I ah, *liberated* a few books from the Citadel when I left.”

Jon raised an eyebrow incredulously.

“Obviously I’ll send them back when this is over,” Sam assured, not that Jon really had any opinion on the theft outside of mild amusement. “But I couldn’t get the Maesters there to believe me, and well, I thought those books would be put to better use here instead of gathering dust in some forgotten corner.” He paused, considering something for a moment, and then looked at him a bit sheepishly. “Perhaps I shouldn’t admit to such things in front of a king.”

“I won’t tell anyone if you don’t.”

Sam seemed ready to reply, but a sudden, jerking motion from Bran had them both turning to look at him in concern. Bran was stiff, gripping the arms of his chair so hard his knuckles were white with the strain.

Worried, Jon stood up quickly and walked over to him. “Does this usually happen?” he asked.

Sam shook his head. “He hardly ever reacts at all,” he said. “This is new to me.”

Just as quickly as it happened, Bran relaxed again, though his eyes remained cloudy.
“Bran,” Jon murmured quietly. “Bran, it’s alright.” He reached out to place his hand comfortingly on his shoulder, not sure what else to do.

As soon as he did so, it felt like the world shifted beneath him. Everything glowed brighter and brighter until suddenly he was no longer in Bran’s room at all.

He recognized it immediately as Dragonstone, at the entrance to the dragonglass cave. It was daylight, and much warmer than he’d known it to be. He stared in fascination at the waves crashing against the shore. No dragons flew in the distance this time.

It was a strange sensation. He knew he was still in Winterfell; he could also feel the warmth of the fire in the hearth and smell the familiar smell of home. Yet he also felt the sand beneath his boots, tasted the salt on the wind, and relished the bright sun upon his face.

Although his hand was still on Bran’s shoulder, Bran himself was not there with him. He was alone on the beach.

But why?

In the back of his mind he could hear Sam asking a question but Jon couldn’t understand the words. They sounded muted, distant, as if he was trying to speak to him through water.

A sound behind him echoed sharply and Jon turned to see a man emerging from the cave. He was tall, assured, his clothes plain, but they had a fine air about them. His shoulder-length hair was the same silver blond that Daenerys had. He couldn’t see the man’s eyes, but Jon assumed they would also be the same shade of deep violet.

The man stopped short as he looked up, staring at Jon as if he was seeing a ghost.

Perhaps he was? Could he see him? Jon looked over his shoulder, checking to see if there was something approaching from behind.

All he saw was the ocean.

He wasn’t sure what to do, so he just stood there, staring back at the man who could clearly see him.

“IT’s you,” the man said, his voice filled with wonder. “The one I’ve been waiting for.” He took a step forward and Jon could see that tears shone in his eyes. He was sure his own face wore nothing but confusion. He looked around again and saw no one else on the beach. The man took a couple steps forward. “You look just like your mother,” he whispered, almost reverent.

Jon stared back at the man, feeling strange. Something about his face, the way he stood, seemed familiar somehow. “How do I know you?” he wanted to ask.

The man seemed to take his lack of recognition with a resigned sadness, as if it confirmed something he already knew. “You’re our only hope,” he said seriously. “It’s the only way.”

Jon wanted to ask the man what he meant, but just then the world righted itself. The beach was gone, the warmth, the wind, the sun, the Targaryen man - all disappeared and Bran’s room came into focus once more.

Jon removed his hand from Bran’s shoulder and stepped back, staring at his hand and back to his brother. Bran’s eyes were now back to normal and staring at him with bright intensity. He returned the expression with disbelief, trying to keep the nausea from rising in his throat.
“Did you see him?” his brother asked. “The man on the beach?”


“What did you see?” Sam asked, wide eyed, staring between the both of them.

It was Bran who answered. “He saw his father.”


Sam and Bran exchanged a look. A strange feeling began to form in the back of his mind as he regarded the two of them. Something wasn’t right, but he wasn’t sure why he was feeling so uneasy just then. It wasn’t something he hadn’t felt in the presence of either of them, ever.

“Bran, perhaps now is not the time,” Sam murmured. “Let him-“

“Who was that?” Jon asked, interrupting, looking between them both.

“You’ve always wanted to know about your mother,” Bran said. It wasn’t a question.

He stared at him, brow furrowed. What did that have to do with anything? “I suppose, yes,” he said, after a while. “Father never told me anything about her.”

“I suppose the memory was too painful for him,” Bran said, his tone musing.

It was something in the way he said it that made Jon’s heart race. He’d seen her. Hope swelled in his chest. “Do you know who she is? Is she alive?” The words all came out in a rush; he was desperate to know anything at all.

Bran looked at him solidly for a long moment, his eyes piercing as if he were trying to see right through him.

“Yes, I saw her,” his brother said finally. “She died giving birth to you.”

Although he half expected to hear of it - what other reason would his father have to keep her memory locked away? It could only be grief. Yet there had still been room for hope, back when he’d had no choice but to fill in the missing pieces with his imagination. The finality of knowledge was both a relief and a blow.

He couldn’t think of anything to say. Did he want to know the rest?

“Father found you that same day, and brought you both home,” Bran continued.

Jon blinked. “What do you mean?”

Certainly if Ned Stark has brought the body of another woman home from the war it would have -

The cold sharpness of understanding washed over him.

“Your mother is Lyanna Stark,” Bran said quietly, and Jon felt as if the words were being told to him from far away. “The man you saw on the beach was Rhaegar Targaryen. Your father.”

The words felt like dead weight hitting him in the chest. “What?” Jon whispered. “How can that be true? He-“ Jon felt dread spreading through his chest. “No - you must have gotten something wrong,” he insisted, his voice strained as he tried to keep it even. “You must have.” His mind was a jumbled mess. He couldn’t think. It was too much. He leaned forward and put his head in his hands.
He tried to concentrate on breathing.

“I’m sorry,” Bran replied, seeming to truly mean it.

“I don’t understand,” Jon finally choked out after several long moments. “I don’t understand why he would lie. Why he couldn’t tell me.”

“It was the only way to keep you safe.”

“Safe from what?” he demanded.

“Robert Baratheon made it his life’s mission to kill every Targaryen he could find,” Bran said. “Your mother knew this and begged him to protect you. He took you in and claimed you as his own knowing that no one would question it.”

His throat was dry and he felt like the walls were closing him on him.

“You may not have my name, but you have my blood.”

The words came floating up out of his memory as if from a dream.

“If he wanted to protect me then why did he practically send me to the Wall?” Jon asked, not really expecting an answer. “If he cared so much then why would he do that, knowing full well what it was?”

“I think I know why,” Sam said quietly, speaking for the first time.

Jon looked over at him sharply and waited for his explanation.

“The Night’s Watch vows,” Sam continued. “Once you swore yourself to the Watch, any threat or danger against you would go away. You know, the whole thing about not having titles and lands and whatnot.”

That didn’t make any sense. “Bastards have no titles to inherit,” he said, frustrated. “Whether I’m the bastard of a Lord of Winterfell or a…” He nearly choked on the next words. “Or the Crown Prince makes no difference.”

“Well, you see, there’s more,” Sam continued, his tone nervous, clearly trying to convey he wished this conversation weren’t happening just as much as Jon did.

“Tell me,” Jon said sharply. “Tell me the truth. Everything you know.”

“Rhaegar didn’t kidnap Lyanna Stark at all,” Sam replied. Each word hit him like a stone. “She loved him, and went with him willingly.”

More lies. “And how do you know that?”

“At the Citadel I transcribed a septon’s private diary. In it, he stated Rhaegar had his marriage to Elia Martell annulled, and the septon married Lyanna Stark to him thereafter. He told no one.” Sam paused before continuing, as if to gather himself. “You’re not actually anyone’s bastard at all. You’re trueborn.”

Jon felt as if he swallowed sand. “A trueborn Targaryen,” he whispered hoarsely.

Sam looked at him, face more still and serious than he’d ever seen it. “And the heir to the Iron Throne.”
The silence was broad and suffocating. His head ached and he wanted nothing more than to go back to his room and sleep and pretend that none of this was real. The silence that stretched between the three of them was heavy and full of tension.

“Is Jon even my real name?” he asked finally, not sure he wanted to know the answer even as he spoke the question aloud. It was the final stone of his identity that he still clung to. Jon Snow, the bastard of Winterfell. It was the cornerstone of everything he was. People knew him and judged him on that name, crowned him King in the North on that name, the name he thought his father gave him.

The man who wasn’t his father at all.

“Do you want to know it?” Bran asked quietly, shattering his world with complete finality.

“Go on then,” Jon replied, his voice a half whisper.

“She named you Aegon, to honor your half brother who was murdered.”

Aegon.

Aegon Targaryen.

His feet took him straight to her room without him really registering that he’d intended to go there. He just knew that he had to see her. The need to do so was so desperate and so singular that he almost went in without knocking or really even considering the time of night. Jon leaned against the doorframe trying to get a handle on himself.

Nothing’s changed. You’re still you.

But was he?

Everything he had was based on the assumption of who everyone thought he was. What right did he have to be King in the North now? Should he renounce the title?

Then who would lead?

He felt sick. He should go back to his own room. Or perhaps he should go to the yard and hack a sparring dummy to pieces instead, Maester Wolkan’s warnings be damned.

But all he could think about was her.

He knocked on the door quietly, and after a moment Missandei opened it, her face changing from questioning to concern as she saw him. In the back of his mind, he remembered that it was very late at night and he was dressed very informally, but she stepped back to let him in without so much as a word. The door clicked shut quietly behind them. He could see Grey Worm standing still at attention against the wall, spear in hand. The soldier glanced to him in recognition but he did not move.

“How is she?” Jon asked Missandei, his eyes going to the bed on the other side of the room.

“The maester says she will be alright,” Missandei replied. “But he said he won’t know for sure until she wakes up.”
A sharp pain ran through him. “She hasn’t…?”

She shook her head. “No, your Grace,” she whispered. “I am worried for her.”

He swallowed, a lump of anxious worry hard in his throat. “As am I,” he said quietly. “I would sit with her a while, if you want to get some rest.” Missandei seemed torn by indecision, but it didn’t take much convincing on his part for her to accept his help. After a long moment, she and Grey Worm departed for the Guest House and Jon promised to send for them if anything changed.

Then he was alone with his thoughts once again.

He walked over to the bed quietly, grabbing the chair from the desk to place at her bedside. Daenerys lay in the furs, her hair loose and her face peaceful. In the light of the fire she seemed to glow.

*His family. His father’s sister.*

He clenched his fist in a sort of reflex, frustration and anger and despair coursing through him in a violent storm. It seemed to him some sort of cruel trick. He finally knew the answer to the question he had been asking since he’d had the ability to ask it, only for it to not cause him closure and relief, but pain.

It almost didn’t seem real. Like it was a dream his mind had conjured up after a night of too much to drink. He sat there and stared at Daenerys for a while, watching as furs rose and fell slightly with her steady breathing.

The ash and blood had been washed from her face and hair, and he could see the cuts and scrapes that marred her skin. One of her hands was bandaged tightly, and he remembered seeing it in the Hall before. How the blood had left a mark on the table when she stood beside him.

He leaned forward and brushed a strand of hair from her face, his hand lingering for just a moment. Daenerys let out a soft sigh and leaned into his touch but did not wake. Jon let his hand slide down as he sat back, taking her unbandaged hand in his, running a thumb across the top of it in a soft motion.

What would she think about the truth?

Did he even have the strength to tell her?

All he could think about was everything he had to lose if the truth came out. He’d sworn Sam and Bran to secrecy, trying his best not to be angry with them directly. After all, it wasn’t their fault. Telling him had been a reluctant necessity they’d felt obligated to say, an obligation he understood it while hating it all the same.

An hour or so must have passed as he sat there with her. Her hand in his was a comforting anchor in the storm of his thoughts. Then her eyes opened and met his, full of light and love.

The world was cruel.

“Jon,” she whispered, her voice barely a barely audible breath. He knew instantly that he was lost.

“I’m sorry for waking you,” he replied softly, moving closer.

“I’m sure I’ve slept too much already,” she said, trying to raise herself into a sitting position.
Jon placed his hands on her shoulders to keep her still. “You need to heal and rest.” She didn’t fight him.

“Your arm,” she murmured, looking at the bandage with concern furrowing her brow. She twined her fingers in his and he let her.

“It’s not serious,” he assured. “I won’t need it but a day or two.”

“Well, I am sorry for it regardless,” she said, squeezing his hand gently.

Jon looked at her, his throat dry, the pain in his chest that had started in Bran’s room making it hard to breathe. He tried to remain calm, but he wanted to both kiss her and flee the room.

“Will you tell me what is bothering you?” Daenerys asked quietly, her eyes seeking his in the firelight, bright and soft with concern. She reached out with a hand to brush it against his face gently, and he felt the war of emotion within him again. The touch was soothing but it also burned. He wanted to close his eyes and lean into it, to pull off his boots and lay beside her, to smell the spice of her hair and feel the gentleness of her breathing against him. He wanted it more than anything he could name.

“I love you,” he whispered to her, a quiet, painful admission that was both an answer to a question and a deflection. Even when faced with the unbelievable facts of his origins he still loved her desperately, wholly, completely.

“And I love you,” she said, a whisper. “But you haven’t answered my question.”

He brought her hand up to his lips and kissed it, and for the first time since they’d met, he lied.

“I’m fine.”

Chapter End Notes

man this chapter ended up being like four more pages than I originally planned, and I wrote all four of those extra pages at work today instead of doing my actual job. pretty sure there is a definite correlation regarding strength of muse and amount of things I have to do at work.

so yeah, anyway. this is only the beginning of Jon's personal crisis, so prepare yourselves for some drama y'all
Sansa II

Chapter Summary

Sansa tries to solve some problems.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Sansa II

The weather was getting noticeably worse.

Outdoor activity had shifted from preparing the keep for war to preparing for the oncoming storm. That morning Jon had ridden out with a couple of Queen Daenerys’ advisors to warn the Dothraki that had set up a sprawling camp to the west - at least, that what Ser Davos had told her when she went looking for her brother for what seemed like the hundredth time. It had been three days since he’d returned from Last Hearth, and though he was apparently well enough recovered from his injuries, she had to take that on the word of others instead of confirming for herself. He’d barely spoken half a handful of words to her personally and she was starting to get the impression that she was being specifically avoided.

The thought had irritated her immensely until Arya mentioned that she’d had the same difficulty, and now annoyance was shifting to a deep concern. His usual reticence was one thing, but going out of his way to even avoid Arya? That set off a warning in her mind that something was seriously wrong.

She tried not to fume about it too outwardly as she walked down the stone hall towards her study. She had asked Tyrion to meet her there, because on top of the war and the weather and whatever issues her brother was apparently suffering, that morning Maester Wolkan had also informed her that Daenerys Targaryen had become seriously ill. The severe throes of winter sickness is what it sounded like, and that was a dangerous development for a number of reasons. One, this illness had felled many a healthy man, even in summer, and the queen was already weakened by injury. Two, anticipating the upcoming storm, there were going to be more people in the keep than usual and in such close quarters an illness would rip through them all with relative ease. Three, and the reason for calling the meeting with Tyrion, was the very real possibility that Daenerys Targaryen could die.

Podrick was waiting at the door to her study when she reached it, a tense-looking Tyrion at his side. “You wished to see me,” the shorter man said, looking more gloomy than usual.

“I do,” she replied, pushing open the door and beckoning for him to follow. Podrick remained outside, making sure to close the door behind them.

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see her.”

“Yes, that is under my instruction,” Sansa confirmed. “Illness could kill us all if we’re not careful. I also take it you’ve been informed of the incoming storm.”

“I have. Any clue as to how long it will last?”

“Storms like this are very unpredictable,” she replied. “It could last two days, or it could rage for near a week. It’s best to prepare for the worst.”

“A good practice for most things, I’m sure,” he murmured.

She let a moment pass before speaking again, trying to broach the subject delicately. “Preparing for the worst is why I asked for this meeting,” she said. “I want to talk about your queen, and what your plans are if she doesn’t recover.”

He remained silent for a moment, jaw set, and she watched the struggle in his face dispassionately. “My plans?” he repeated.

“I want to know what will happen with the Unsullied and the Dothraki and the dragons if Daenerys Targaryen dies,” she said, clarifying. “I would assume you’ve thought about that.”

“I...have. But I’m afraid there are too many scenarios for me to accurately-“

“Your best guess, then, and we’ll work our way down from there.”

Another long silence. “The Unsullied would follow Grey Worm, whatever he decided to do,” Tyrion replied slowly. “He may decide to stay and help you knowing that Daenerys would wish him to do so. The Dothraki, on the other hand, are not so altruistic.”

“How do you mean?”

“They follow strength,” he said simply. “Whoever kills the current leader becomes the new leader. Daenerys killed all of the khals they had, and that’s how she got them to follow her. Unless Jon can show that same strength, then you would likely have bands of wild, lawless horsemen on your hands.”

“If that’s the case, would they even recognize her marriage to my brother?” she asked. “Provided, of course, that she is eventually well enough to do so.”

“That would be a question only Daenerys could answer, I’m afraid,” Tyrion said. “My command of Dothraki is limited only to their more colorful insults.”

“And the dragons?” she asked. A roving pack of Dothraki screamers was dangerous enough of a possibility, but two dragons flying about, wild, with no one that they answered to? It was a terrifying prospect.

“And another question for the queen, I’m afraid.” Tyrion paused to consider something for a long moment, and then proceeded again, rather delicately. “Or perhaps Jon could give you better answers.”

Sansa tried not to show any outward frustration. Of course this would be another problem she needed Jon’s help to solve. That list was getting quite long. “You think he would know better than you, her Hand?”
Tyrion looked resigned. “It’s likely. They have had a number of private conversations that the rest of us were thankfully not invited to.”

She sighed as she realized what he was implying, and tried not to think about it too hard. “If their relationship is that serious, why didn’t they just marry on Dragonstone?” she asked, wanting to move past the subject as quickly as possible. “The matter would be settled and done. Why wait and invite all this uncertainty?”

Tyrion fidgeted with a rough spot on the arm of his chair. “Your outlook on marriage is obviously soured due to having two less-than-desirable husbands chosen for you,” he said deprecatingly. “But to my knowledge Jon has not had such bad luck. My guess is that he wanted to be at home with his family for such an occasion.”

A knock at the door interrupted their conversation. She turned in surprise to see Jon, clad in his usual dark leather and steel. The cuts to his face were well on their way to healing. He still walked with careful deliberation, and she could see the slight hint of wrapped linen bandages underneath the sleeve of his left arm. “I received word just now from the Karstarks,” he said, straight to the point without preamble. She wondered if he’d overheard them discussing him so personally. He didn’t show any signs of it, if he had. “We should expect them to arrive in a couple days. About six hundred, ahead of the storm.”

“I’ll see what’s left in Wintertown to put them up in,” she acknowledged. Another problem to add to the ever-growing list. “Will you stay put a moment? We have to-”

“Later,” he said, cutting her off. “We can talk later. Find me when the Karstarks arrive.”

She flushed with anger at his disregard, knowing perfectly well there would be no ‘later.’ as he made to leave. If he listened to only one thing got from her today, she would make sure he knew about Daenerys. That was the most important, pressing, problem for him as a monarch, affection for her notwithstanding. “Wait, Jon,” she said. He turned to look at her. “Did Arya find you?”

“Arya?” he repeated. “No, I haven’t seen her.”

Of course he hadn’t. “We’ve had news of Queen Daenerys,” she said. “Arya was meant to tell you.”

Jon appeared to brace himself. “What is it?” he asked quietly.

“Fever,” she replied simply, and watched as Jon showed emotion for the first time in days. “It’s not looking good.”

She didn’t need to elaborate; he knew what it could mean. She watched as his mind traveled down the path of the dark conclusion. Despair flickered across his face, brief and painful, but it was gone as soon as it appeared. After he’d composed himself, he merely nodded in understanding. “Keep me apprised,” was all he said, and then he left.

Two more days passed, and she saw him only twice in that time.

The first time she had caught him passing in the hall in the early morning. It was clear to her he hadn’t slept at all and once again he barely let her get any words in before disappearing to wherever it is that he went. If he listened to only one thing got from her today, she would make sure he knew about Daenerys. That was the most important, pressing, problem for him as a monarch, affection for her notwithstanding. “Wait, Jon,” she said. He turned to look at her. “Did Arya find you?”

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The first time she had caught him passing in the hall in the early morning. It was clear to her he hadn’t slept at all and once again he barely let her get any words in before disappearing to wherever it is that he went. She’d given up trying to get anything out of him at this point. In fact, she had even asked Bran to tell her where he was going off to, but he steadfastly refused to do so.

The storm was threatening them closely now, and it would be a race to see which arrived first; the driving snows or the Karstark refugees. Daenerys had not improved, and with each day of her lingering illness Sansa could feel the entire keep waiting with morbid anticipation to hear if she
would succumb to it or not. Most of the inhabitants had been converted into cautious supporters, thanks in part to the tireless efforts of Lord Umber and his increasingly elaborate retellings of his rescue, as well as the fervent rumors that had sprung up in the wake of their return and address to the Lords.

The betrothal between Jon and Daenerys hadn’t been officially announced by anyone, and because of that the rumors regarding the particular nature of their relationship had taken a rather wild and salacious turn. Her brother, occupied as he was by the incoming storm, the threat and anxiety of war, and the constant worry for the woman he loved, had obviously not bothered to consider the impact of withholding such information.

However, it seemed that word of it had gotten out anyway, and on the fifth day since Jon’s return Lord Glover came marching up to her on the breezeway demanding to know the truth of it.

“Is he really to marry the Targaryen girl?” he asked, making no effort keep a level tone.

“Where did you hear this?” Sansa asked in reply, making a concerted effort to keep her face expressionless.

“People talk,” he said, as if that were enough of an explanation. “I’d like to have an answer.”

“I’m afraid that’s something only the king can confirm,” she said, using his authority as an excuse to avoid further argument. “Especially with Daenerys Targaryen so unwell.”

“Surely, my Lady, you would know your own brother’s mind?” he challenged.

“Perhaps, but it is not for me to speak for him.”

“What is it that you need me to confirm?”

Jon appeared around the corner, adjusting his sleeve around a freshly rebandaged forearm. He looked worse than he did the day before, dark shadows under his eyes emphasized by a constantly creased brow, his posture weary as if he were constantly carrying weights about his shoulders. His voice was flat and emotionless.

“I heard talk that you were betrothed to Daenerys Targaryen, your Grace,” Lord Glover said. “And I wished to know whether it was a falsehood.”

Jon regarded him for a long moment. “It’s not,” he said simply. “She offered, and I accepted.” Though he had seemed prepared for this answer, Lord Glover was apparently taken aback by the easy affirmation. “Is there something about it that confuses you, Lord Glover?” Jon asked in the same flat tone as the lord struggled with finding a reply.

Sansa could see that the older man was having a difficult time maintaining his anger. “Is that wise, your Grace?” he asked finally, the words coming out through gritted teeth. “Perhaps a Northern girl would be more appropriate.”

Jon stared at him. “An interesting suggestion,” he replied. “Do you know of any Northern girls that could provide me with two armies and two dragons?”

“I thought she agreed to help us of her own will,” Lord Glover said. “Isn’t that what she said?”

“She did - though I hardly think a more secure alliance is too great a thing to ask, considering what she’s done for us already,” he said. “This also ensures that her dragons will always be on our side - or would you prefer to fight against them? I can have Lord Umber explain to you what that is like;
his accounting is quite accurate.”

Lord Glover’s eyes flashed, clearly still outraged but unable to find a good counterpoint. Sansa watched as he looked to her, apparently for assistance, but she gave none. “I don’t think it’s worth tainting the Stark line with Targaryen madness,” he said finally.

This got a reaction from Jon, and Sansa fought the urge to step back. The anger seemed to emanate from him in a menacing, fiery wave. “I encourage you to speak your mind, my Lord,” he said, his voice low and dangerous. “But I’ll not hear another word that disrespects the queen, am I clear?”

The sudden show of strength had Lord Glover taking a step back out of self preservation. “Aye, your Grace,” he said, and departed.

Jon made to leave as well, but Sansa caught his arm as he passed. “I have to speak with you,” she said. “And I’m going to have to insist.”

He looked at her grasp on his arm, and then met her gaze. “What is on your mind?” he asked, still heated from the earlier anger but clearly trying to rein it back in.

However, the calmness of the question irritated her. “Many things are on my mind,” she said, tone sharp. “You’ve been avoiding me.”

“I’ve been busy,” he replied. It wasn’t a denial.

“We’re all busy here,” she said, narrowing her eyes shrewdly. “And I want to know what it is that you’re doing that makes you so impossible to find?”

“Someone has to maintain contact with the Dothraki and Unsullied,” Jon said. “As clearly their queen is unable to do so.”

“That someone doesn’t have to be you,” Sansa argued. “Daenerys has other advisors for this reason. You can’t do everything.” Her words were met with silence, but Jon didn’t pull away from her.

“Look, I can tell something isn’t right with you,” she continued. “You’re skipping meals. It’s obvious that you’re not sleeping either. If you won’t tell me what’s wrong then at least tell me how to help you.”

“I’m fine,” he said, quietly and unconvincingly, and then amended. “I’ll be fine.”

“You’ll forgive me if I remain skeptical.”

“I’m not finished,” she hissed at him, forcing him to stop.

“Then I don’t know what else to tell you.” He pulled his arm away from her, putting space between them in a slow, deliberate action, and walked past her without a second glance.

The coldness of it was hard to handle at first, like a slap in the face, and she stood there for a moment in shock before stalking after him. “I’m not finished,” she hissed at him, forcing him to stop.

“You’ll forgive me if I remain skeptical.”

“Whatever you want from me, I can’t give it to you.”

There was a long silence as they stared at each other. “I didn't think that wanting to speak with my brother was too much to ask,” she snapped. “If you want to go back to our childhood ways of ignoring each other, fine.” She tried to keep her tone level but she could feel emotion getting the best of her. “But you could at least give me the respect of treating me the same as your other lords and bannermen. I’m tired of having to speak to you through Ser Davos. I’m tired of Arya asking me if I’ve seen you. I'm tired of you brushing me off when I have serious things that need your attention.”
He at least had the good manners to look guilty as she spoke, though he did not seem eager to respond. “It’s not you-” he began, but trailed off and didn't finish his thought, his eyes pulled to something over her shoulder.

She turned to see a guard behind them. “Your Grace, my Lady, I’m sorry to interrupt,” he said, looking awkward at having stumbled into their argument.

“What is it?” Jon asked.

“There is a messenger at the Wintertown gate,” he said, eyes darting cautiously between the two of them. “He is from the south. Asking for you by name.”

Sansa blinked. “From the south?” she said. “Are you sure?”

“He’s not a Northerner,” the guard said. “By the way he talks.”

“Did he say what he wants?” Jon asked.

The guard shook his head. “No, your Grace.”

Sansa looked over towards the other end of the yard, and sure enough, a man stood there in plain, travel-worn clothes, arms crossed, looking in their direction with expectant curiosity. Jon immediately walked to the stairs and off in that direction. He clearly knew who he was.

“Are you expecting someone?” she asked, hurrying forward after him to walk at his side.

“You don’t recognize him?” Jon asked her, and she focused on the man as they crossed the yard. Graying blond hair and a shaggy, month-long growth of a beard had mostly obscured his face, but as he made eye contact with her she felt the shock of recognition.

Jaime Lannister.

Where were his armies, his banners?

“I was expecting a commander, not a messenger,” Jon said as they approached, apparently thinking along the same lines.

“To be a commander you need people to command,” Jaime replied. “An important technicality.”

So that confirmed he was indeed alone. “If you have no army, then what are you doing here?” Sansa asked, narrowing her eyes.

“As you can probably guess by my appearance, I am not here in an official capacity,” he said dryly, but then adopted a more serious tone before continuing. “Cersei has decided not to honor her pledge.”

She had expected that Cersei was not going to help them since the moment Jon had mentioned the possibility to her. The woman would never do something so generous without receiving something much better in exchange. Judging from the lack of reaction to this news, Jon had not really expected the help either. Still, the confirmation was devastating. The North would die thanklessly protecting everyone to the south, leaving Cersei to come forward and take whatever was left of them come spring. Jon shouldn't have even wasted his time with her. He should have just come home.

“So you came here yourself, alone, to tell me this?” Jon asked.

Jaime sighed. “Yes.”
“Does she plan to fight us then?” Jon asked, as if he didn’t actually expect an answer.

“Not immediately.” The candor surprised her. Jaime was ready and forthright with the information when she had expected hesitation and resistance. “But you should know she has bought the services of the Golden Company.”

“The Golden Company?” Sansa repeated, realizing immediately that she was the only one who didn’t recognize the name.

“They are Essosi mercenaries,” Jon said, answering her question. He turned back to Jaime. “Euron Greyjoy, I assume,” he said.

“An elaborate deception that I was not aware of at the time,” Jaime answered. The sting of the betrayal hovered in his voice like a shadow.

“How many?”

“I heard her say twenty thousand.”

Jon sighed, more a resigned breath of air than anything. “Is there anything else I should know?”

Jaime shrugged. “Probably,” he admitted plainly. “But I’ve told you all the information I have.”

The wind shrieked through the archway, tossing her hair about, a cold reminder of the incoming weather. “We should probably discuss this inside,” she said to them both, noting the curious glances in their direction from others in the courtyard. She turned to Jon. “That is, if you have decided to believe what he has said?” She didn't know if she believed him herself. He certainly seemed honest, but she didn't trust his motives. Fortunately for them, Bran would be able to tell them the truth of his statements easily enough.

Jon regarded Jaime for a long moment. “If what you say is true, why come to the North at all?” Jon asked him. “Why leave King’s Landing?”

Sansa could see the resignation and acceptance in the older man's face, and the anger that still showed there, raw and painful, in his eyes.

"I gave you my word that I would help you fight," Jaime replied seriously. "And I'm here to uphold that promise the best that I can."

Chapter End Notes

sorry for the delay on this. been working some hella overtime at work and unfortunately that has eaten into a lot of my writing time.

so we got a couple more chapters of talky talky exposition while I get characters into place, and then we'll have some serious action happening. I have the Battle for Winterfell written out already and not to toot my own horn or anything but i can't wait for you guys to read it.
so anyway, please feel free to leave comments with your thoughts, predictions, favorite dessert recipe, opinion on toast, etc. I enjoy the conversation.
Daenerys woke up.

He was leaning back in a chair next to the bed, feet up on something she couldn’t see, a book in his lap held limply, his head against the wall behind him. Asleep, and fully dressed, though the posture and the book made it clear he had been there for some time.

Slowly, she pushed herself up into a sitting position, wincing at the pain in her side as she moved. She sank against the wooden headboard with a hard exhale, using one hand to brush her hair away from her face. She felt like she’d been crushed by stone. Every part of her body ached and throbbed, and each breath felt like fire in her throat.

The hearth burned low, and through the gaps in the shuttered windows she could see the sky outside was still dark. Now that she was positioned a bit more upright, she confirmed that the room was not the one she’d been given in the Guest House. The bed was smaller, the furs were more eclectic and well used. The furniture was sparse, and a wardrobe in the corner had a door that was slightly ajar. It clearly belonged to someone else.

She wracked through her mind, searching for clues in her memory, but she came up with nothing. The last thing she could recall was a hazy address to the lords of the North, and an argument with Tyrion afterwards about which she could remember no details except for the pain in her side. It had been excruciating then, a hard, sharp, persistent pain when she breathed and walked. Now it was a calmer and duller feeling, but it was still there.

She closed her eyes and reached out to Drogon, searching for him through their shared connection. His answering roar was firm and strong, though he was far enough away that she was likely the only one who could hear him. It soothed her. She remembered that he had been injured in the fight, his blood a dark stain in the snow, his cries of both pain and rage at the abomination his brother had become. His call to her now held no such pain, only an answering comfort.

“Daenerys?”

She opened her eyes to see that Jon had woken, sitting up straight in his chair, one hand setting the
book he held on the table beside him.

“I’m alright,” she assured, though the hoarse rasp of her voice likely did nothing to convince him of the truth of it.

He moved to sit on the side of the bed, taking her hand in one of his and using the other to feel the side of her face. She watched him as he did so, his brow furrowed with concern.

“How long have I been asleep?” she asked quietly.

He hesitated before answering and she felt unease pool in her chest. “Five days,” he whispered.

Her heart sank. “So long,” she murmured, upset.

“Yes,” he replied quietly. His voice was pained. “It was.”

She reached out to brush a finger along the cut to the side of his face. It was well on its way to healing now, but it would be another scar.

One more on a list of many.

He took her hand in his and placed a kiss to her fingertips. “It is a relief to hear your voice,” he said, looking at her with serious concern. “I was afraid I wouldn’t hear it again.”

There was a tightness in her chest at the words. “That serious?” she whispered, shocked.

Jon nodded. “Aye, that serious.”

She swallowed, wincing as it hurt to do so. Part of her wanted to know the details, and another, larger, part of her did not. She sighed, and leaned back into the headboard again, Jon’s eyes watching her carefully as she did so.

“I’m alright,” she repeated him, meeting his worried gaze, then glancing over at the chair he had previously occupied, and then to the window, noting through the gap in the wooden shutters that it was well into the night. “You haven’t been in that chair all night, have you?” she asked. He didn’t respond, but his eyes told her the truth that he had.

“It’s a relief to see you well,” Tyrion said, sitting in a chair across the hearth from her. It was well into the afternoon now, and Daenerys was feeling much improved after a thorough bath and fresh clothes. The only lingering effects of her illness seemed to be a persistent echo of pain in her head and a hoarseness that shadowed her voice when she spoke, though both of those continued to quickly fade with time.

From what the maester had told her, she had been laid low by the illness sharp and fast, and, coupled with her already weakened state, she had been in danger of never waking again. That knowledge had thrust Jon’s reaction to her awakening in the early hours of the morning into sharp perspective, and she had further learned that he had watched over her every night since their return.

As soon as the maester allowed it, she sent for Missandei to help her dress. It had been a laborious
affair as she tried to get used to the limited movement she had to deal with from the tightly wrapped bandages. The most serious of her injuries from the fight at Last Hearth had ripped a rather large and jagged hole in her side, making movement of any kind a painful task. Her advisor, though Daenerys did not consider her a handmaiden in any form, was a blessing as she helped her wash and dress, and she appreciated the comfort of having a friend assist her, especially considering how close she had come to not seeing her again.

Once she had decided herself acceptably presentable, Daenerys had sent for her Hand. He had been unabashedly relieved to see her not lain in bed as he likely expected, but sitting upright in a chair by the fire.

“Missandei tells me that your brother has joined us,” Daenerys replied, cutting right to the point. Business first; pleasantries could wait until later. She was desperate to catch up on news. “Without an army behind him.”

Tyrion sighed. “Yes, Jaime is here.”

“I have to confess that I while I understand the sentiment of upholding oaths, I’m not sure how much help a one-handed man can give us,” she replied. “Especially when Cersei has bought the Golden Company.”

“He has more uses than just his sword,” Tyrion replied delicately. “He is a strategist and a good commander. It’s worth a lot that he is here with us and not with my sister.”

“And you say that he arrived two days ago?”

“Yes.”

“And what is the North’s opinion on this?” she asked.

“I’m afraid you’ll have to ask the North.”

“Have you not been speaking to them on my behalf?”

“I have tried,” Tyrion replied, clearly frustrated. “But with you unable to…” he trailed off and started again. “Things have been strained. I’m sure you were informed of how serious it was. None of us were quite prepared to deal with what could happen.”

“If I had died, you mean.”

He winced at her bluntness, and Missandei looked at her hands as she wrung them together on her lap. Neither one of them were comfortable hearing the words, and though she appreciated the difficulty of the conversation, she needed them to get used to the idea that she could, in fact, die.

“Yes, that is what I mean,” Tyrion replied quietly.

She sighed. “I don’t like the idea of it either,” she said. “But it’s not entirely unavoidable and it would be foolish not to acknowledge it.” She looked at them both. “What I saw at Last Hearth was horrifying. And what has happened to Viserion has made him twice as deadly as before.”

“We heard the details,” her Hand replied. “Lord Umber has been advocating on your behalf. Everyone knows what you did for him.”

“And I would do it again,” she said firmly. “I will have to. We all will.”
It was late that night when she knocked on the door to his room.

She’d gotten the location from Arya, who had come to stop by and see her not long after Tyrion had departed. In the course of the conversation, Daenerys came to find out that the room she was in belonged to the younger Stark sister, a gesture she had meant in kindness not only to a guest but to a woman of whom her brother was fond. The two of them only talked for a little while, as it was mostly a polite inquiry as to her health, but it was clear from their short conversation that Tyrion was not the only one Jon had been avoiding.

A concerning development.

He’d not been by to see her at all that day, and so she decided to go in search of him herself. So far she had tried twice at his door but received no answer, and she was determined to continue coming back as long into the night as it took for him to return. She was not concerned for sleep; she had done quite enough of that recently.

This was the third time she approached his door and knocked. There was a pause, but a moment later she heard him murmur permission to enter.

Pushing the door open, she saw he still remained facing away, focused on one of the many papers that littered the plain wooden table. The room was larger than she expected, and she looked around, interested in the space and the details of Jon that it shared with her. It certainly had his tendency towards the utilitarian - everything was functional and in its place. Nothing elaborate. Nothing extraneous. It was not the grand chambers one would expect a king to have.

Jon looked up as the door clicked shut, and she saw his face shift from serious to surprised.

“You’re surprised to see me,” she murmured, leaning against the door.

A ghost of a smile tugged at the corner of his mouth. “I am,” he replied. “Pleasantly.”

“That’s good to hear,” she said, pushing off the door to walk towards him. “What are you working on so late into the night?”

He watched her as she approached, eyes serious and focused. “A number of things,” he said quietly.

She glanced to the table. It was covered in maps and charts and slips of raven scrolls, some annotated in his steady, even handwriting. “I can see that.”

“I’ve set up a system of scouts to range north,” he said, pointing to the large map of the North that dominated the table. His mind was still clearly occupied with the task. “Bran can’t see as far as I would like, and I need to know how fast the army is moving towards us.”

“Is there anything I can do?” she asked. “To help?”

He turned back towards her. “Stay well,” he said seriously. “I need you.”

She pulled him into a firm but brief kiss, a clear reminder that she was here, she was well, hoping it would assuage any remaining fear that he had for her health. “I’m not going anywhere,” she whispered, her arms around him.
The turmoil in his face was clear. She caught his eyes flick down to her lips, obviously wanting to kiss her in return.

And yet, he hesitated.

After a long moment, his arms fell from her side and he stepped away from her. “I have to speak to you about something,” he said quietly. His tone was worrying and deadly serious. “And it cannot leave this room, do you understand?”

She was immediately worried. “Yes,” she replied, frowning. “What is it?”

“I spoke to my brother, the night after we returned from Last Hearth,” he said, his voice almost a whisper. He couldn’t meet her eyes now, and focused on the hearth between them instead. “He had seen something he thought to be important.” He swallowed, and there was a long silence as she waited for him to continue. “Were you ever told of what occurred between your brother Rhaegar and Lyanna Stark?” he asked.

She blinked, surprised. “Yes, a little,” she admitted. “I’m not sure I believe it entirely if I’m to be honest. It didn’t really…make sense?” she tried to find the appropriate words, knowing that the entire incident was likely a delicate subject. “With everything else I’d been told of him it just didn’t seem like something he would do.”

Jon seemed far away and distant, as if lost in his own mind. “What were you told?” he asked quietly.

She sat down in the chair, obeying the commands of her injury as she thought about what to say. “I was fortunate to have been in the company of Ser Barristan Selmy for some years in Essos,” she began. “Do you know of him?”

Jon nodded. “A great knight and swordsman,” he said. “I have heard stories.”

“He knew Rhaegar quite well, and spoke of him often,” Daenerys continued. “He told me that Rhaegar was everything my father wasn’t: kind, thoughtful, and preferred reading to fighting, though he was quite adept at both.” She paused and looked at Jon. He was listening to her with great intent. “A trait I think you share,” she added.

Jon was still, staring at the fire before them, and she noticed that he was wound tight, his grip on the back of the chair before him was like a vice. Her mood faded immediately at this. “Jon, are you alright?” she asked, worried.

“Yes,” he replied, voice a whisper. He didn’t look at her. “Is there anything else?”

“I’m afraid that’s all I really know of him,” she said slowly, confused by his reaction. “Everything else is more of the same - but it’s all... good. Especially from those that knew him personally; that’s why the incident with Lyanna Stark seems so strange to me. Kidnap and rape was not in his character.” She paused and took a breath, looking Jon. Shadows of the fire flickered across his face. “I am curious as to why you ask,” she added quietly.

There was another long silence as the crackling of the fire sat between them. “It appears your knowledge of him is correct,” Jon said finally, his voice layered and tense. “The story Westeros was told was a lie.”

Her heart pounded in her chest. “Truly?”

He turned to meet her eyes at this, his face set hard as if he were about to deliver some unpleasant news. It didn’t make sense to her why he would be reacting this way - unless the truth was somehow
worse? But what could be worse than what had already been told?

“Bran saw the truth of it,” Jon said. “And I assume you trust his word.”

She remembered Bran quoting the witch’s prophecy to her and suppressed a shudder. “I do,” she confirmed. “What has he said of my brother?”

“Rhaegar Targaryen didn’t kidnap Lyanna Stark at all. She went with him willingly. They were in love - and she ran off with him,” Jon said, the words coming out stiff and measured. “Rhaegar annulled his marriage to Elia Martell, and married Lyanna thereafter.” He paused, his voice shaking. “Robert Baratheon used the lie of her kidnapping as an excuse to declare war, and caused the deaths of tens of thousands as a result.”

Now it was her turn to be angry. “You’re telling me the end of my family was caused because of damaged pride?” she asked, shocked disbelief and rage coloring her voice.

“There’s more.”

More? What on earth could possibly be more than this? “Tell me,” she urged.

“Lyanna Stark died giving birth to a child,” he said. “A son.”

Anger turned instantly to hope and joy. “A son?” she asked, almost desperately, her heart clinging to the blinding beacon of hope that surged within her. Family. Another Targaryen in the world. “And he...lives?”

Please tell me I’m not alone.

Jon swallowed and looked at her again, face set hard as he prepared to speak again. She braced herself for bad news, yet hope sprang too strongly in her heart.

“Yes,” Jon said, and she thought she might burst from the relief and joy she felt. But she was confused by his reaction. Why was he acting as though someone had died? “That child…” he took a deep breath. “That child is me.”

To say it was the last thing she expected would be an understatement, and it took several long moments for her to really process what he was saying. The thought that Jon was anything other than what he had held himself out as was completely foreign to her. Judging from his demeanor, it seemed to her that he was feeling much the same.

Her mind tried to grapple with the implications of this, but she felt a greater need to comfort him in the immediate term than to deal with her own emotions. He was waiting for her to say something.

“Oh, Jon,” she murmured compassionately, looking up at him, his tense posture, the dark shadows on his face, the pained look in his eyes. She remembered Tyrion’s complaints that he’d been disappearing, that he’d been short with his family and avoiding meals. Her heart went out to him as she realized that he’d been struggling with this for days, alone.

“I had to tell you,” he said quietly, tone clearly indicating that he wished he hadn’t.

“I’m glad you did,” she whispered. There was a strange tension in the air between them that she wasn’t quite sure how to address. As her mind began to catch up with her emotions, she began to see why. “But you didn’t want to.”

“No, I didn’t.”
She wasn’t quite sure how she felt about that.

“I was afraid,” he continued, softer this time. “Afraid of what it might change.”

She understood to what he referred, and she felt a hitch in her chest. Did he intend to separate himself from her because of their shared ties? She tried to keep her breathing even to calm her heart. “Do you anticipate it changing things between us?” she asked, hardly daring to ask the question.

“This doesn’t...this hasn’t altered my feelings towards you, if that is what you are asking.”

“And what are your feelings towards me?” she asked, her voice a quiet whisper.

He stepped forward towards her and took her hands in his. His eyes were full of certainty and purpose. “That I love you,” he said. “With everything I have.” He took a deep breath to gather himself. “I have spent the last several days second guessing everything I have ever known and every decision I have ever made,” he continued. There was a hard hitch to his voice as he spoke, as if he grieved a terrible loss. “You are the only thing that I know for certain is true and real.”

He was still in great distress, and the more they spoke the plainer it became. “And I love you,” she replied, her voice cracking a bit. “I-“

He kissed her then, lips capturing hers with earnest relief and cutting off what she was trying to say. She wanted to melt into him and lose herself to him, and for a moment she did, pulling him close and returning it with equal measure. It burned within her and she found herself desperate for him. She wanted to leave the conversation at this, to leave the harder questions for another time, but she knew she couldn’t. She broke away from him regretfully, though she remained in his embrace.

“What are you going to do?” she asked him.

“What do you mean?”

She looked up at him. “I mean, when will you tell others?”

He seemed to stiffen a bit. “I’m not telling anyone else,” he said, tone surprisingly emphatic.

Daenerys furrowed her brow. “But why?” she asked, stepping back. “This is important. My family died and I lived a life in exile because of a lie. The anger towards me here is based on a grudge that no longer has any basis!”

“This may absolve your brother in some form but the Mad King earned his name,” Jon replied sharply.

“Yes, the Mad King,” she repeated. “Your grandfather.”

Jon blinked sharply in surprise and his face set in a grim line. Clearly this was the first time he’d really made that connection since learning the truth about himself, and his negative reaction hurt her more than she thought it would.

The space between them was small, but it felt cavernous. “If the lie about your parents hadn’t been told, then the war may have turned out different,” she said. “You would have grown up a trueborn son. A prince.”

“Who knows how it would have turned out or not,” he replied, frustrated. “What happened, happened, and there’s no use dwelling on things that can’t be changed. I only told you this because it seemed wrong not to tell you and that is all. I don’t intend for anyone else to know, nor do I intend to
The rejection stung at her sharply. “So you will perpetuate the lie instead?” she asked. “Or is it because you are ashamed of what you are and what I am to you?”

“I am not ashamed of us,” he said sharply. “But you’ll forgive me if I’m not eager to start a political crisis on the eve of war. That’s what the truth will do. It won’t vindicate your brother. It won’t make the North love you. Don’t you understand that I have everything to lose? My family, my home? I have spent years trying to get people to take the threat of the Night King seriously, and I’m finally in a position where I have the power to actually do something about it. I’m not about to jeopardize that. Not now. There is too much at stake.”

She was unsure what to say to that. In truth, she was still struggling to put together all the ramifications of what he’d told her and as she tried to sort through it all a tense and heavy silence settled between them.

As they stood there, a steady warmth in the back of her mind, announced Drogon’s presence as he flew high above, his friendly call echoing to his brother. The fact that he was flying and seemed otherwise unbothered by his injuries heartened her greatly, and she let their calls to each other fill her mind and calm her. They were too high and too far away from the keep for anyone else to notice them, but she knew they were there.

Rhaegal let out a call of his own, her connection with him more tenuous than it was with Drogon, but it was still there. As it happened, she saw Jon flick the barest of distracted glances to the window before focusing on her again.

Something occurred to her then, realization washing over her like an icy wave. “You heard them,” she whispered, shocked.

Jon looked at her, confused. “The dragons? Of course I did.”

The confirmation was like a stone weight hitting her in the chest. “Can you tell where they are right now?” she probed, stepping forward.

“Can’t everyone? They aren’t exactly quiet.”

“No,” she whispered, eyes wide. “They’re miles away.”

He seemed to struggle to understand what she was trying to say, and she realized she’d have to explain her connection to them more clearly. “Have you always seemed to know where they are?” she asked him. “In the back of your mind?”

“I suppose,” he said slowly, his brow furrowing as he looked at her. “Since I saw them on Dragonstone.” He trailed off, and then sat down in the chair as if he felt unwell. “I assumed it was just...paranoia.” He sighed, leaning forward to put his face in his hands.

Daenerys walked forward and kneeled down before him, slowly taking his hands in her own again, kissing his fingertips gently. “You are connected with them, just as I am,” she whispered. “Because of your blood, because of who you are.”

Silence stretched between them, and although he did not meet her eyes, he made no move to remove his hands from hers.

“It’s a gift,” she continued. “Something only those with the blood of Valyria can have. It’s why Targaryens have traditionally kept to themselves - so that our connection to the dragons could remain
She wanted to cry. Jon remained silent.

“For so long I thought that I was the last of my family,” she started, knowing what she had to say but struggling to find the courage to say it. “That I was the only Targaryen left in the world. And as a consequence of one of my decisions I thought I had sealed my own fate as the last Targaryen there would ever be.” She waited to see if he would interject, but he didn’t, his expression calm and waiting for her to continue. “It’s a lonely feeling, knowing that you’re the last of something, and I’m not going to pretend that it didn’t cause me grief because it did. It was a constant pain in my heart that wouldn’t soothe. And now today I learned that I’m not the last at all, that there is another Targaryen in the world.” She took a deep breath and blinked away tears. “Jon,” she pleaded, still on her knees before him. “You must set me aside.”

There was a cold silence at her words, and he dropped her hands as if she burned him.

“What?” He asked, his voice low. It was not really a question.

“You must set me aside,” she repeated, and she watched as pain flickered across his face. “No more Targaryens can ever come from me. You are the last hope for our House to continue after we’re gone.”

“How can you ask this of me?” he asked quietly. “I cannot. I will not.”

“You must,” she insisted, tears streaming down her face now. “If we die, then there will be no one left with the power to-”

“The world survived without dragons before.” He stood up and moved several paces away from her. “And it could do so again.” There was pain in his face as he turned to look at her. “I could never love another.”

“It’s not about love,” she said, pulling herself up and following him. “It’s about something bigger than ourselves.”

“Daenerys -”

“If we remain together our House will end.”

“It’s not my House!” he said angrily.

“But it is!” she replied, matching his volume. “You would condemn my family - our family! - to end this way?”

“Aye, I would!” The heat of his anger was radiating off of him. “You were fine with it ending this way when you thought I was a bastard king without a House to my name at all!”

“It’s different now!” she insisted.

“No, it isn’t. Nothing has changed. I refuse the name and the title that it implies. I will remain Jon Snow until the end of my life and that will be the last we speak of this.”

His visceral refusal stung harder than she expected, and despite his earlier assurances that he was not ashamed she was finding it difficult to believe him.

“Names don’t matter, only words and actions matter,” he continued, still angry. “No one here is
following you because they are loyal to House Targaryen!” He stepped forward and grabbed her arms, turning her roughly to face him. “You have earned their loyalty in spite of your name. They follow you because of your actions, not your House.”

She closed her eyes. Why couldn’t he understand that it wasn’t about that at all?

He was close now; their lips would touch if either of them moved forward. “Do you love me?” he asked, desperate.

“Yes,” she whispered.

“Then choose me, Daenerys,” he said, a quiet plea. He kissed her again. “You don’t have to give your whole heart to the world. You can keep some for yourself.” His forehead rested on hers as a tear ran down her cheek.

She wanted to. Desperately. She wanted nothing more than to give in, to fall into his arms and into his bed and pretend that this revelation didn’t mean anything at all, but she couldn’t. She knew he didn’t believe her when she claimed she couldn’t have children, but she knew, deep in her heart, that it could never be. It was her curse, her punishment to bear for her selfish decisions.

She couldn’t be selfish now.

Surely he would understand the sacrifice of having to choose duty before love?

But she looked into his eyes and saw that he did not. Hurt and devastation shone there instead as he came to realize what her silence meant.

It felt as if something was prying her chest open, but she slowly released his hands and let them fall.

“I’m sorry,” she said, the room blurry as she tried to blink away tears. “I’m sorry.”

Then she turned away and left the room without another word.

Chapter End Notes

what's this, an update two weekends in a row? I know. I surprised myself too.

taking some creative liberties with the targaryen dragon connection because it's fun.

let me know what you think.

related side note: has anyone else seen the Game of Thrones Live Concert? I went
recently for the first time and man that shit was awesome. 14/10 would get hyped for the Targaryen theme again
He picked up the hammer and swung it down hard, ramming the post into the half-frozen ground. The dull thud of iron on wood echoed from a collection of similar hammers on either side of him, wielded by Northmen and Wildlings in a long row outside the northern wall of Winterfell.

It was the beginnings of a cross-post defense assembly: long, sturdy wooden beams facing up out of the ground at an angle, pointed and tipped with razor sharp dragonglass.

He paused to take a breath, leaning on the long handle of the hammer. The arm that had been injured at Last Hearth burned with a painful reminder, but he ignored it. It still hurt him with a low, consistent and constant pain and didn't show any signs of abating. The cut had been deep, and though the wound has closed, Maester Wolkan thought it may be weeks before it fully healed - if it did at all.

Jon didn’t have weeks to spare, however, and resigned himself to just dealing with it in silence.

It was just another thing to add to his ever growing list of problems.

The dead. The living. The lies his father told him. Daenerys. Each one another layer to the complex maelstrom that he found himself in, and each one left him feeling more consistently and painfully alone.

So he decided to deal with it all in the most expedient way he could think of: throwing himself into work.

“If he came here to help you’d think he’d be down here with us,” a Northman murmured aloud, also looking upward. “Or are the Lannisters too good for hard labor?”

Glancing up atop the wall in front of him, he saw the tall figure of Jaime Lannister standing with Grey Worm, pointing out over the moors as he spoke. Jon assumed Tyrion was up there as well, though the smaller man was not visible.

There were a few murmurs in agreement with the man’s sentiment amongst those in earshot. Jon didn’t think it was anything more than a mild disgruntled complaint, but he decided to head it off anyway before it turned into something more. “May I remind you that Jaime Lannister only has the one hand,” he said to them dryly. “Not sure how much help he would be to us down here.”

The man blinked, as he had apparently forgotten Jon was there. “Apologies, your Grace,” he said, and resumed his work.
He’d not quite known what to do with Jaime Lannister when he’d arrived as a travel worn shadow of the commander he’d seen at the Dragonpit, bringing with him news of betrayal. It was easy to believe him, earnest as he was in his statement that he was there to uphold his oath, and as forthright as he appeared to be when offering up information of his sister’s plans against them. Still, Jon knew better than to take everything he said on faith and had gone to Bran almost immediately after to get the truth of it.

Tension knotted in his stomach as he thought about his brother who wasn’t his brother at all, and he grabbed the handle of the hammer again, swinging it hard onto the post.

Verifying Jaime’s claims was the first time he’d gone to speak to Bran since learning the truth about himself, and it had taken several false starts as he headed towards the room, then turned around, and then went back again before finally pushing through the anger and nausea and tension that he felt, because it was critical that he know Jaime’s intentions before allowing him in and trusting him with his people, and that was more important than avoiding one of the sources of his own personal hell.

Bran, of course, gave him the information readily, affirming that everything Jaime has said was true. He was brighter and kinder to him than he’d been, more aware of himself and of Jon, clearly bothered at the mess it had made. Jon, however, was not ready to speak to him about it and aimed to keep the short conversation to Jaime Lannister and nothing else.

“He’s a different man than he was when he was here before,” Bran had said, contemplatively, as if his mind was elsewhere in another memory.

“We all are,” Jon had agreed, and left without another word. He could tell Bran wanted to speak more about what he’d told him, the truth about his parents, his birth, his name, but he didn’t give him the chance.

*She named you Aegon.*

Jon swung the hammer again, as if the action would crush the memory away, slamming another post into the ground.

*No, my name is Jon.*

Jon was the name he was given by the man that raised him. Jon was the name of the 998th Lord Commander of the Night’s Watch. It was the name of the King in the North. It was the name he’d built himself out of blood and sweat and death.

Jon was the name that Daenerys would whisper in his ear as they sought comfort and connection with each other late into the night.

Memories of her flooded his mind, but he banished them with a wave of anger and another swing of the hammer. He’d come out here so that he *wouldn’t* think about her. It was too much. He couldn’t handle it. He couldn’t look at her without feeling as if he were tearing apart piece by piece.

He hated himself for telling her the truth. He wished he hadn’t. It should have stayed as his one secret, locked away, never to be acknowledged or addressed again. They wouldn’t be separating from each other now if he’d done that.

But he knew he couldn’t marry her without her knowing exactly who he was. It was a level of deception that he could not stomach.

Now he suffered the consequences.
They had only managed to handle one council meeting since it happened, a tense affair that had seemed like an endless torture as he tried desperately to pretend that he was fine. Jon gripped the hammer and swung it again, hard.

“You hit that thing any harder and you’ll split it in half.”

Jon looked up to see The Hound staring at him shrewdly, his own hammer in his hands.

The Hound had escorted the Karstarks through the gates of Winterfell the day before yesterday, bringing with him reports of another storm that would be upon them soon and a list of places where there had been homesteads and villages and people that had refused to leave. In response, Jon had sent several riders out under his banner to be, well, more persuasive. Who ever was left north of here would certainly fall, and he didn’t want anyone succumbing to the Night King’s army out of some misguided sense of homestead loyalty.

“I have a lot on my mind,” Jon replied to him, a vague, non-committal response.

The Hound shrugged and went back to his own post, leaving Jon to stew in his anger and self loathing.

It was deep into the afternoon when he returned to the keep, intending to rest a bit before walking the walls with Jaime once more before sundown. He also intended to meet Sam in the library after that, and thought perhaps his friend would appreciate it if he wasn’t covered in sweat and mud in such close quarters.

Though it was a bit awkward at first, Sam was one of the few people that Jon could be near since learning of his true nature. He was one of the few relationships that remained unaltered, and he found himself relying heavily on his friend to maintain some sense of solid normalcy while the rest of his life swirled about it him in chaos.

Sam was also very good at not bringing any of it up, which Jon found to be preferable. It was easier to sit there in companionable silence as they combed their way through books from the Citadel and anything left in Winterfell’s library that might contain a shred of helpful information.

There had been a number of other books brought to him from the maesters in residence at other keeps in the North, some copies of what he already had, some filled with nonsensical notes and bits of rumor. Before he’d left for Dragonstone he had asked for every mention of Night King, his army of dead men, or any reference to the Long Night - and he had certainly gotten it.

So now he helped Sam read through it all in his limited spare time. It was a way for him to keep his mind clear of his anger and doubt and focused on the task at hand, and it also turned out to be a helpful place to hide as the library was tucked up into a lesser-used tower that saw little visitors.

There was some pain in his shoulders as he walked across the courtyard, sore from swinging the hammer for most of the day. He sighed, and held an arm across his body to stretch it out as he began to climb the steps to the breezeway.

He should have been looking where he was going, but he was so lost in his own thoughts that he didn’t see her in time to avoid her.

“Jon,” Daenerys called for him, stopping in his path as he reached the top of the stairs. Looking at her now you wouldn’t know that she had been so close to death only days ago. She looked exactly like the queen he’d met at Dragonstone, with the grey coat and dragon chain, fierce, determined eyes, and silver hair loose and blowing in the wind. He’d thought her beautiful then.
It killed him to look at her now.

“What do you want?” he asked, trying to keep his voice even. He walked past her.

“I’d like to talk to you,” she said quietly, following. “Will you stop a moment? It’s important,” she insisted. “Please.”

Jon stopped and turned around to face her. “If it’s about the war then we can speak later with our council,” he said.

Violet eyes stared back at him. “It isn’t.”

“Then I don’t care to hear it just now,” He turned back away from her.

“Jon Snow you will listen to me.” Daenerys practically hissed the words at him, anger flaring.

He stopped walking and turned to her again, his own anger threatening to get the best of him. This was a fight that had been brewing for days, both of them carefully stepping around each other in an effort to avoid it. “Are you sure this is the best place to start this?” he snapped. “Not sure how well our alliance will hold if everyone sees us fighting.”

She took a deep breath, but her eyes still flashed. “This was the first time I’ve been able to get you to look at me in days,” she said. “I was running out of options.”

“Well you have my attention now,” he said, tone biting and harsh. Try as he might, he couldn’t keep the pain of looking at her from spilling out into his voice. “What is it?”

Daenerys held her ground for a long moment, straight as a spear and a queen from head to toe, but then her shoulders bowed and the angry expression faded to one of concern. “I...” she sighed. “I just wanted to make sure-“ She stopped again to gather herself, composing her face to one of polite neutrality. “I just wanted to see how you were doing,” she murmured.

“How do you think?” he asked, her calmness did nothing but anger him more. “I won’t look at you because doing so is just a reminder of what I’ve lost. I’m not particularly keen on the feeling.”

She winced visibly at his words. “It’s hard for me too,” she said. Every word she spoke just made him angrier. He had to get away from her. It was too soon. This was too hard. “But we can’t function as allies if we-“

“You’ll forgive me if I take a bit longer to handle it as well as you appear to have done,” he snapped.

Silence greeted his words. The comment was unfair, and he knew it as soon as he said it. She stepped back as if he’d slapped her.

Jon had the apology on his lips when someone called to him from the courtyard below. He turned to see one of the gate guards standing with a horseman that had just arrived, Manderly sigil emblazoned across his chest.

“Your Grace!” the Manderly man called. “I bear a message.”

Jon retraced his steps past Daenerys and back down the steps. “What news?” he asked the man as he dismounted.

“Jorah Mormont requests aid,” the rider said, a young man, his voice wild and breathless as if he himself had run the distance and not his horse.
“Of what sort?”

“We intercepted people fleeing from Last Hearth,” he said. “Near a thousand of them. We don’t have enough men to keep order. Smallfolk are terrified and fleeing into the forest screaming about blue eyes and dragons. Mormont is worried they will begin to tear themselves apart if we can’t calm them down.”

Jon remembered Hardhome, and the way the Wildlings had crushed each other in the desperate push to escape to the boats. Fear was just as dangerous as what came for them, and if they didn’t do something about it then a thousand more people would be added to the ranks of the Night King and all of the efforts at Last Hearth would have been wasted.

“How far away?” Daenerys asked. She had followed him back down the steps.

“About two days hard ride,” the Manderly soldier said. “But at the pace they have to go it will still be several more before they can get to Winterfell.” He glanced at the sky. “And a storm is coming.”

“Get something to eat in the Hall and rest a bit,” Jon told him. “I’ll gather some men and we’ll ride out within the hour.”

“As you say, your Grace.”

Jon went back up the stairs with purpose, not bothering to check and see if Daenerys followed. Their conversation would have to remain unfinished for now. He stopped once to send a man for Ser Davos and another for Sansa, with instructions for both to meet him at his room.

“I don’t suppose there’s anything I can say to convince you not to go yourself.”

Daenerys had followed, and stayed in the open doorway as he grabbed his vambraces off the table.

“No,” he replied. “There isn’t.”

“I should go with you,” she insisted. “Drogon could get there in less than an hour—”

“Weren’t you listening?” Jon reminded her. “The thought of dragons is one of the things sending them fleeing into the wilderness. The last thing they need is to see right now is Drogon.”

“Then I’ll ride with you.”

He looked up at her after he cinched the buckle tight on the first vambrace. He glanced pointedly at her waist, where he knew her injury was still far from healed. “Can you mount a horse without help?” he asked her. “Because I don’t think you can.”

Her face hardened at this, but she had no rebuttal and watched him gather pieces of his armor in silence. He let it lie, preferring instead to focus on the problem of the refugees. That, at least, was an issue he could solve.

“You wanted to see me, your Grace?” The gruff voice of Ser Davos cut through the tension a moment later when he appeared in the doorway. The older man eyed the two of them cautiously, but made no mention of the strained atmosphere.

“I did,” Jon said as he went to grab Longclaw from its place in the corner. “Ser Jorah has requested aid. I need you to find a hundred men ready to ride out with me as soon as possible. Tell them to prepare for a journey of several days.”
“Aye, I’ll see to it,” the older man said, and disappeared as quick as he’d come.

Jon was throwing a worn saddlebag over his shoulder when Sansa appeared a short while later. “What’s this I hear about you riding north?” she asked, tone clearly indicating that she disapproved, and doubling the number of disapproving women standing in his doorway. He sighed, and explained the situation to her.

“I have to go,” he said, both an argument for his actions and a request for her and Daenerys to move out of his way.

Sansa moved aside. “You should take Arya with you,” she said as he passed.

“You’re joking.”

“I’m not.”

He sighed. “Are you going to tell me why or do I have to guess?”

“Frightened smallfolk aren’t going to be soothed by the presence of more armed men,” Sansa pointed out. “I understand why you are going...because they’ll see you and think, ‘surely a king wouldn’t be stupid enough to ride headfirst into danger.’” Her tone was pointed, and he ignored it. “I want to add to that idea by having Arya accompany you. If they see you’ve brought your sister, it means you don’t anticipate attack or danger. It doesn’t matter if you do expect otherwise, or that Arya is just as deadly as you are with a sword in her hand. It’s about the message it will send.”

Jon thought about it for a long moment before finally conceding that he didn’t have a good enough argument against it. Sansa was right about the visual message, and he had seen Arya sparring in the courtyard enough to know that she could defend herself just as well as anyone. He wasn’t pleased with the idea of having to spend days on the road with her and avoiding her inevitable questions, but once again there was a greater need that superseded his personal wishes.

“Fine,” he said finally. “Go tell her to prepare. I won’t wait for her.”

Unsurprisingly, Arya was already in the courtyard when he finally made it there, a hand on the reins of both her horse and his own. He threw the saddlebag on his shoulder across the top of the steady brown mare and secured it before taking the reins himself.

“You know why you’re here,” he said to her, stern and serious.

The same grey eyes he had stared back at him, as if from a mirror. While interacting with Sansa was mostly a required necessity, Arya was the hardest to be around since discovering the truth and he avoided her most of all. He had always heard growing up that she was the very image of Lyanna Stark in mind and appearance, and the fact that Jon had those same features had just further cemented their closeness as children. It was hard to feel like an outsider around someone who looked like you.

Now, however, looking at her just served as a reminder of what he’d learned, what he’d lost, and what he’d never known.

“Sansa said I’m to keep you from doing anything stupid,” Arya said, a hint of a tease in her voice.

“I need you to promise me that you will follow my orders,” he said seriously. It was a command from a king, not a request from someone she saw as a brother. “And you will follow them to the letter, without question. Do you understand?”

Her excited anticipation fell from her face at his warning. “Yes,” she said. “I promise.”
“Even if it means you to ride back here and leave me behind.”

There was a long pause as she wrestled with the implications of this. He knew it was a hard thing to ask of her, but it was necessary. Things always had a habit of going badly and he wasn’t about to add her to the long list of deaths that weighed heavily on his conscience.

Arya looked at him and repeated her promise, though a bit more reluctantly this time.

Satisfied, he turned to pull himself up onto his horse. He looked around the courtyard and whistled for Ghost, who came bounding out from around the forge to circle about him in eager anticipation, ready to shoot out ahead as soon as they left the Wintertown gate.

He took one last look around the courtyard. He saw Arya at his side, ready to follow his lead. Sansa stood on the breezeway to see them off, a hand up in a half wave, which he returned.

As he turned back he caught a glimpse of silver hair in the shadows, standing in the corner of the breezeway that lead into the keep proper. He met her eyes only for a moment, and then he turned away to urge his horse forward and out into Wintertown where his men had gathered.

They met up with Ser Jorah and the refugees from Last Hearth about midmorning on the second day, having ridden hard from Winterfell and pushing the pace deep into the night to take advantage of the full moon and clear skies. The caravan was as strained and chaotic as the messenger had described, and they lost a full afternoon of travel as Jon rode through them all on his horse, speaking with them, reassuring them, urging them to stay together.

To his relief, Sansa had been right about bringing Arya. She rode at his side as he did all of this, and he could see that the sight of her, calm and unworried, did more to help the situation than anything he said. Arya had also taken the time to appear less warrior-like, leaving her hair long and unbound, her weapons mostly hidden unobtrusively by her cloak. Jon wondered briefly if Sansa had told her to do that or if she had the idea herself.

When the sun had set, it the first hints of a storm appeared on the horizon. Clouds began to slowly obscure the sky, and this prevented them from making any headway after dark. It was slow to move, but so were they, and Jon was not sure they would make it back to Winterfell before it hit.

The next few days would be hard.

Now, the dim light of pre-dawn filtered through the trees as Jon walked through the wood that ran the length of the west bank of the Long Lake. Ghost loped along just ahead of him, disappearing in and out of the trees. The slow pace of the caravan made both of them restless, and as Jorah prepared the people to leave Jon decided to take a winding route through the trees to the west. Something about the forest made him uneasy, and he couldn’t decide if it was paranoia or...something else.

“What are you doing out here?’

Arya stepped out from behind a tree to his left, snow dusting the hem of her cloak and a bow in her hand.

“I could ask you the same,” he replied, stopping.

She shrugged. “Following you,” she admitted, then gestured to her bow. “And a little practice.”
Wind blew by, swift and cold, biting and clawing at any slice of bare skin it could find. Jon felt a shiver up his back that had nothing to do with the weather. “You should go back to the caravan,” he said to her.

Arya ignored him. “I was told to keep an eye on you,” she insisted. “I can’t do that from there.”

“I’ll be back that way in a few moments,” he replied. “Just need to clear my head is all.”

“Clear your head of what?”

He sighed. “I don’t want to talk about it.”

She frowned. “I promise I won’t tell anyone,” she said earnestly. “But I’m worried about you. Something’s wrong. I know you’re trying to hide it but I can tell.” Arya stepped forward, and Jon had to force himself to stay and not step back. She noticed that, however, and a hurt expression flashed across her face at his attempt. “I thought perhaps…” she trailed off into silence before starting again. “I guess a lot has changed,” she said finally, crestfallen.

“It has,” he acknowledged quietly. He could tell her feelings were hurt at being kept at a distance. It hurt him too. He missed the easy assurance of her company. His distance had created a rift that they had never had before; not when they were children, not when she found him on the Kingsroad. But there it was, a gaping chasm that grew wider and wider with every moment he remained silent.

“Can you talk to Daenerys?” she probed tentatively.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, are you at least talking to someone?”

“There’s nothing to say.”

“I’ve never known you to be a liar.”

“It’s complicated,” he replied finally, frustrated. He wanted out of this situation.

“What, and I can’t understand complicated things?” Arya said, frowning at him. “I’m older now than you were when you left for the Wall. I’m not a child.”

The words were an indignant rebuke, and a well-deserved criticism. Jon looked at her then, feeling both apologetic and also…wistful. The adventurous ten year old he remembered was gone, replaced by a grown stranger that stared back at him with his own eyes.

“No,” Jon murmured finally. “You aren’t. And to answer you question, I’m not currently speaking with Daenerys, nor am I interested in doing so.”

Arya looked at him, her expression a bit contemplative and confused. “That’s a strange attitude towards someone who’s to be your wife,” she said. “I thought—“

“Daenerys asked me to set her aside,” he said finally, finding the admission to be cathartic and surprisingly easy. “A couple days ago.”

She looked up at him sharply. “What?” she asked, surprise coloring her voice. It was clear that whatever she had guessed his issue was, this was far from it and she was unprepared.

“You wanted to know what was in my mind,” Jon said, sighing. “That, in particular, has been at the forefront.” He tried to sound neutral about it, but he was certain that he was failing spectacularly at
doing so. He began to walk back the way he had come. “You have until we make it back to the caravan to ask me anything about it that you want. After that, you keep it to yourself and tell no one. Understood?”

She nodded in silent understanding as she walked at his side. “Did something happen?” Arya asked quietly, her entire demeanor changing. “I mean, you haven’t said anything to me about it but it’s pretty clear there’s something more than politics going on.”

He wondered what to tell her. The whole crux of the issue with Daenerys was out of the question; the knowledge of their shared ties, the discovery of his connection to the dragons, the fact that he did, after all, have a name to pass on, all rolling into a pile of shit that did nothing but cause him anger and frustration.

“She believes she can’t have children,” he answered finally. A half truth.

“Oh.”

Truthfully, he didn’t know precise details and wasn’t entirely sure he wanted to know. Daenerys had mentioned that she’d carried a child once, a vague reference in the story of her life that he hadn’t pressed on. It didn’t take a clever man to notice there was no young child at her side, and what that meant.

The crunch of snow beneath their boots filled the silence until Arya spoke again. “Is that…something that is important to you?” she asked tentatively.

A good question that Jon had asked himself more than once. He couldn’t deny that he had dreamed about children some day. A big family like the one he’d grown up with. Strong boys and fierce girls and the sound of their laughter ringing through the stone halls of his own keep. It had been an abstract thought all his life, a wish and a hope of having something more than what he thought the world would offer him. Then it had turned into a cynical dream when he was in the Night’s Watch, a fantasy to warm his thoughts at night. The children always varied and their faces blurred, except for brief, stolen moments a lifetime ago when he dared to imagine some could have hair as red as flame.

And now?

_The dragons are my children. They are the only children I will ever have. Do you understand?_

An admission. An olive branch. An understanding. Daenerys felt the loss of her family deeply and had long ago resigned herself to being alone.

He understood that too.

The difference was that while she seemed to accept it as an unchangeable fact, Jon again strived for something more. He wanted something more for her. He wanted something more for himself.

Two people, alone in the world, made whole by a family of their own.

And if it truly turned out that this family consisted of only the two of them for the rest of their lives, then so be it. He’d rather have her than any promise of future children that he may or may not have.

“No,” he said finally, sure for the first time in his life that the answer was true. “It isn’t.”

Arya was silent for a little while, and seemed about to say something else when her eyes seemed to catch on something over his shoulder and she frowned, stopping in her tracks. “What is that?” she asked, more to herself than to him.
The strange feeling still brushed the back of his mind, an odd prickling sensation that he was being watched. Arya didn’t seem to share his unease, and he wondered if he was just overreacting to Ghost. That happened to him sometimes; a shared wisp of feeling between the two of them that could be so strong he thought sometimes he dreamed he was in Ghost’s mind, knowing his thoughts and feeling his instincts on a hunt.

He turned around to follow her line of sight as she walked past him, headed to an opening in the trees. His uneasy feeling grew, and he looked around for any sign of Ghost.

It was then that he noticed that not only was there no sound from the wolf, but there was, in fact, no sound at all. No rustling of trees in the wind. No chatter of wildlife or chirping of birds. Everything was still. His eyes scanned the trees behind them for signs of movement, and there was none. The quiet put him on edge.

He whipped around to see that Arya had disappeared. He called her name, first in a hushed, urgent tone and then louder as he got no response, hurrying in the direction he thought she had gone. His heart sank and fear tore at him.

A bark and a growl from Ghost snapped his attention to the left, and he skidded to a stop at the sight of him, his muzzle and forepaws stained red, hackles raised, an intense focus in the clearing up ahead. He could see Arya there, frozen in place.

Jon walked quickly to the edge of the trees and saw immediately what had distressed both her and the direwolf. A deer had been butchered there; blood stained the snow in a red that was so bright and fresh against the whiteness he would not have been surprised to learn it was still warm. As he took in the scene, the tightness in his chest began to slowly and steadily constrict until it became difficult to breathe. Not only had the deer been completely torn apart, but the pieces of it had been scattered about in a deliberate pattern.

The pattern of a seven-pointed spiral.

His heart beat so hard he thought it might bruise his chest as he stared, unable to move, looking at each piece of the gruesome display. It was more than just one animal. He saw pieces of a fox, broken antlers sticking out from the severed head of a stag, and at the end of the closest spine: the arm of a child.

Movement caught his eye across the clearing, and shining blue eyes stared back at him from the limp body of a boy. He had been no older than ten when he was killed. Sandy colored hair fell in his face, and the bones of his cheeks showed white through the torn holes in his skin. He’d not been dead long. Ghost growled.

“Are those dragonglass arrows?” he asked Arya, keeping his eyes fixed on the boy.

“Yes,” she whispered, fear plain in her voice. It made her seem younger than she was. She drew an arrow from the quiver, the glass making a soft scraping sound against the leather. Out of the corner of his eye he watched her slowly raise her bow. Her hands trembled at first, but he heard her take a steadying breath.

“It doesn’t have to be a kill shot,” he said, trying to sound calm and steady to reassure her. “You just need to hit him.” It was almost like a re-enactment of a childhood memory, when he would catch her practicing in the hard at night, offering her help and instruction as Ser Rodrick had done with him, and as he eventually had done with Bran as well, except instead of a target made of hay and wood, there was a dead child at twice the distance.
His hand went to Longclaw as the wight stared at them, unmoving. A long moment passed, and the world was so still around him he could have sworn his heart could be heard beating from miles away as he waited.

Then another pair of blue eyes shone in the dimness of the trees behind the boy.

And another.

“Now, Arya!” he urged. Her bow twanged, and the arrow buried itself into the boy’s ragged shoulder. The wight crumpled and fell to pieces.

More blue eyes shone in the mist, too many to count. Too many to fight. Ghost growled.

He grabbed his sister’s arm and ran.

Chapter End Notes

oh no a cliffhanger!!

i promise i won't keep you waiting long. meant to post this yesterday but I was distracted by the ALCS and my beloved Astros

so yeah. let me know your thoughts! feelings! wild predictions! also, in your opinion, which wine pairs best with a grilled cheese sandwich? asking for a friend
Arya III

Chapter Summary

Jon and Arya's adventure, part 2

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Arya III

She had heard Jon’s description of them. She knew, in abstract terms, what was coming from beyond the Wall. However, seeing one in person was more horrifying than even she could imagine. The blue eyes chilled her down to her core.

Jon pulled her through the trees fast, and out of the corner of her eye she could see Ghost running beside them, barking and growling. A white blur. Then, suddenly, she heard the wolf yelp.

Her brother hesitated only briefly, worry in his eyes as he looked in the direction the noise had come, but he didn’t linger. The mist, only the normal pre-dawn fog moments ago, quickly swelled and grew in thickness, obscuring their vision beyond the reach of their own hands.

She tried to keep up with Jon’s pace, but a root tripped her, and she fell to the ground hard. The impact sent a jarring pain through her arms and knees, and her palms scraped even through her gloves. Her breath came in ragged gasps. She heard her brother’s voice, the hissing sound of him drawing his sword, but she didn’t hear what he said, and when she looked up, he had disappeared.

There was pressure on her foot and then a hard grasp, and she turned to see the corpse of a dead man clutching at her, his grip tight on even though the fingers were only bone. It pulled her back with a strength it should not have, and she scrambled to grab ahold of something, anything, fingers desperate for purchase as she dug at the snowy ground. She kicked backwards and slammed her boot into the wights face, sending shatters of bone flying.

Still, it reached for her. With a fluid motion, she whipped out her dagger as the wight pulled its way up her leg, mouth agape and noiseless, and once it was close enough she thrust her arm forward and shoved the blade into the side of its face.

It shattered.

She didn’t let the moment linger. Arya scrambled to her feet and looked around for her brother, drawing Needle with a swift motion as she waited for more of the dead to appear.

“Jon!” she screamed out. There was nothing but fog.

She began to run in the direction Jon had been leading her and she saw brief signs of fighting in the snow. She called for her brother again. All she could see were dark shapes. Jon was nowhere to be found. She didn’t know which direction to go.

On her left, wights flanked her and she gripped her dagger tightly. A wight that was missing its lower jaw came forward across her path. She stabbed forward with Needle, pinning it against a tree.
It screeched and reached for her, and she felt another set of hands ripping at her cloak from behind; hard, bony fingers that made her skin crawl.

She sent her elbow back hard and it cracked against ribs, but it did not phase her second attacker. She left Needle in the tree and swung around, slashing at the second wight with her dagger. The blade took the hand with ease and the wight fell apart.

The one pinned to the tree still screamed at her, a high, ghostly sound. It set her teeth on edge. Arya shoved the dagger up into its head and quickly shielded her face as the bones burst forth and fell away, leaving Needle stuck in the tree, impaling nothing but the torn and ragged remnants of a wool jerkin.

Breathing hard, she pulled her sword out of the tree and sheathed it. It would not be much help to her now, and her bow was long gone, dropped in their haste to flee the clearing. The quiver at her side was empty. The arrows had spilled when she fell.

She could hear more sounds of footsteps through the fog around her, and she froze, waiting for more dead men to come for her and tightening her grip on her dagger.

The faint echo of a sword filtered through the fog to her right, and she sprinted towards it.

She leaped over roots and rocks, dodged trees and underbrush. Her breath stuck tight in her chest as she tried to call for Jon once more, but she could barely gasp out a sound. Catching her bearings was near impossible. The fog made everything strange and unfamiliar.

Arya came around a large tree and suddenly hands grabbed her tightly, knocking her off balance. She tried to pull away, but a gloved hand clamped over her mouth and a familiar voice hissed quietly in her ear.

"Quiet," Jon said, holding her tight against him and pulling them both up against the tree. It had been hollowed out long ago by lightning, providing a small space where they could stand obscured. Overgrowth covered them partially from view. She could feel him breathing hard behind her. The metal of his armor dug uncomfortably against her back. They remained frozen in place, and all she could hear was the barely audible whisper of breath from each of them as they tried to be as still and as quiet as possible.

After a moment that held an eternity, she heard them. Slow, lumbering footsteps crunched in the snow near enough that she thought they could surely hear her heart pounding in her chest. She stopped breathing altogether. So did Jon.

Through the opening they had hid through she watched as dead soldiers passed them, all headed in the same direction, not sparing a second glance to her and Jon’s hiding place. She lost count of how many she saw.

Jon remained still for several long moments after the last of the footsteps had died away, listening.

The world was silent.

“How many did you see?” her brother asked quietly. His voice was barely a whisper in her ear.

Arya tried to think through the rushing emotions of fight and flight warring within her. “At least a hundred.”

“When I say, we’re going to leave this place and run straight for the caravan,” Jon whispered to her, still holding her tightly. “If we get separated, do not stop. Do not look for me. You go straight to Ser
Jorah and tell him what you saw and where you saw it,” he said. “Do you understand?”

“Yes,” she said, not really wanting to consider showing up back at the caravan and having to explain any of this without him. “Which direction do I go?” she asked, suddenly realizing she hadn’t a clue which way to go.

Jon crossed a hand in front of her and pointed in the direction she had come. “Straight that way,” he said. “If you can find the sun, put it in front of you.”

He released her, and she turned to face him in the cramped space. His eyes were hard and focused, staring out into the trees. “Jon, I’m afraid,” she admitted, feeling suddenly like a girl again, wanting her older brother to comfort her. The fear was strange. She’d been in plenty of dangerous situations before, faced down a number of foes without fear or worry. But now? There was something about the wrongness of it that unnerved her. The blue eyes made her skin crawl.

Jon looked down at her, a knowing sympathy in his face. “So am I,” he replied. He took her face in his hands and kissed the top of her head like he used to do when she was young. “Now run.”

It was a hard sprint, and the cold air burned inside her as she did what she was told. Every shape, every shadow, was a potential enemy. A wight burst from the trees to her left, causing her to careen out of reach as she grasped Needle, whipping the sword out and around to take its head with an unsteady and haphazard motion. Jon was at her side instantly, destroying the wight with his own blade.

Right, Valyrian steel. Dragon glass. She fingered the hilt of her dagger as she remembered. Her instincts were wrong; she needed to train her mind to adapt to a different sort of fighting.

No more wights came at them, and Jon urged her to keep running. It felt like both an instant and an eternity before they burst out of the trees, gasping for breath just north of the caravan. The fog was barely a mist out here.

Curious eyes were on them, and a couple of Stark bannermen came forward in concern.

“Are you alright, your Grace, my Lady?” The inquirer was one of the younger ones, about Bran’s age, fresh faced and freckled. She tried to respond, but she was struggling to catch her breath.


“Aye, your Grace,” the bannerman said, setting his face seriously at Jon’s urgency and turning back. Arya looked up to see a family of Wildlings loading their cart, the father looking at them both with a knowing fear. He beheld them for a long moment, then began to hurry his wife and children onward with their tasks without a word.

She looked back towards the forest. This morning it had seemed inviting, and now it only looked like death. Suddenly the trees on either side of the road made her feel caged in and trapped. She hated that she couldn’t see much in the distance. They needed to leave immediately. They needed to get back to Winterfell. It wasn’t safe out here.

The dead boy that she had shot flashed in front of her eyes.

Jon kept glancing back to the trees as well, his face set, eyes watching for movement.

“I heard Ghost,” she said, realizing that the dead likely weren’t the only thing he was looking for. The direwolf had not followed them out of the trees.
“Aye,” he said, turning to her briefly. “He can take care of himself.” His tone was assuring, but it did not match his face.

Footsteps announced the fast approach of Jorah Mormont, his expression immediately one of wary concern. Jon turned towards him and told the older knight what had happened.

“Wights in the forest,” he said quietly so no one would overhear. “I estimate near a hundred.”

“Is it them?” Jorah asked. “Is he here?”

“I don’t think so,” Jon replied. “They seemed to all be Northmen - no Wildlings. These weren’t from beyond the Wall.”

Jorah was reserved and serious, a hand gravitating towards his own dragonglass tucked into his belt. He and Jon spoke in low tones about what to do, and Arya kept her eyes on the trees. She thought she saw something flickering there, a shape in the dimness, but maybe it was just a shadow. It was hard to trust her eyes in the fog.

A Manderly bannerman brought Jon his horse, saddled and ready. “How long until we can leave?” her brother asked.

“An hour, perhaps.”

She realized that fog was getting noticeably thicker.

“We need to do it in half that.”

She grabbed Jon’s arm to get his attention. “I think we’re out of time already,” she said quietly, interrupting.

Jon and Jorah followed her gaze to the trees, and once again she was struck by just how silent and still the world could get.

She felt her brother tense under her hand. “Get everyone moving south, immediately,” Jon ordered, an edge to his voice as he raised it to snap a command to the bannerman nearby. “If it’s not loaded on a cart by now, we leave it. Everyone needs to stay together; eyes on the trees and dragonglass in hand. Quickly. Go.” Jon stepped forward and mounted his horse. “Arya, you and Jorah stay here,” he said firmly as he pulled himself into the saddle. “I will send men to you.”

Arya nodded in understanding and watched as Jon kicked his horse into a fast trot, repeating his instructions up the line of people until he was out of earshot. There was a gradual increase in frantic murmuring as the refugees scrambled to obey his command even through their own fear. The Wilding family helped others around them, the father remaining calm even as he handed dragonglass to his own young children.

She had to look away, and it took a moment and a handful of breaths to really get her mind clear of the emotion and focused on the task at hand. Needle wasn’t going to do much for her right now, and she needed every hit to count. The dagger by itself would not be enough. She glanced down at her empty quiver and cursed to herself. She needed range, she needed distance, and was afforded neither of those things.

Arya walked forward to stand by Ser Jorah, palming the hilt of her dagger.

“Your father taught you how to fight?” the knight asked her, dual dragonglass ready in his own hands.
“Not personally,” she said. “But he didn’t say no when I wanted to learn.” A memory of her father standing in the doorway as she attended lessons with Syrio Forel flashed through her mind. She used it to steel herself. It was a source of bravery and courage instead of sadness. Her father had believed in her. Jon clearly did so as well. She wasn’t going to let either of them down.

The fog continued to creep forward, but no dead soldiers appeared yet. She and Jorah were able to stay ahead of it as Jon got the caravan moving, and the better part of an hour passed as bannermen and volunteers made their way back to the end of it to join them. Every once in a while they would have to step over piles of things that had been left behind; crates of clothes and books, a tent, a cart with a broken wheel filled with a family’s life possessions, all left to rot on the side of the road.

*Things can be replaced,* she thought. *But not people.*

The first wight came from the left side, surprising one of the Manderly men and sending him to the ground hard. Arya rushed forward and removed a skull from decaying shoulders with a slash of her dagger.

They were quickly overwhelmed; the sheer force of numbers punching a hole in the small rearguard they had formed. Arya did the best she could, but she was only one against many.

She could hear Jorah calling out orders but she couldn’t hear them. Hands grasped at her, all in various states of decay. Blue eyes surrounded her with singular hatred. Her mouth was dry and she tried to focus, centering herself by counting the number of wights she was able to destroy. *One. Two. Three.*

*Six.*

*Twelve.*

*Seventeen.*

It seemed to go on forever, and all of her effort seemed to make no difference. They just kept coming.

“Arya!”

She heard Jon calling her name. She could see his horse in the melee, headed for her. An attempt to reach him had her temporarily distracted, and a wight grabbed at her hair, pulling her down to the ground. She flipped herself quickly and shove a boot into a mottled chest, sending the wight flying from her.

Jon was on them both in moments, Longclaw flashing down to cut the wight in half. “Get back to the caravan!” he shouted, shielding her from further onslaught with his horse.

She heard the screech of the dragon as she scrambled to her feet, and she stared up into the sky, fear tearing at her insides. Some distance away, Jorah looked up sharply as well, eyes wide, seeming also unable to tell if it was friend or foe. She could see the dark shape passing over the trees, casting a large, deadly shadow.

Jon stretched his arm down to her, and she grasped it, allowing him to pull her up behind him onto his horse. She wrapped her arms tight about him as he thrust Longclaw out towards another wight and then spurred his horse back with urgency. “It’s Rhaegal,” he said as they reached the line of the caravan, frightened faces of their people staring back at them. Arya was suddenly aware of just how many children there were, and her stomach felt tight with stress. “Stay back,” Jon ordered, his voice carrying over the noise.
Emphasizing his order, he pushed his horse in, urging them backwards. The dead still approached, paying no mind to the dragon above.

“Daenerys is here?” Arya asked, looking up through the trees, trying to see where the dragon had gone.

“No,” Jon murmured, his voice hard and flat. “Daenerys can only ride Drogon.” He wasn’t looking up at the dragon at all, focused on the dead men that continued to prowl forward. “Stay back, I said!” Jon repeated to the caravan, more forceful this time, and they did as they were told. Jorah scrambled back with them, though he remained at their side.

There was a thunderous roar, and fire erupted in the forest before them. The heat was searing, hotter than anything she’d ever felt. Screams of the living behind her and screams of the dead before her echoed together. Arya shielded her eyes, looking down at the ground and away, arms clasped tight around her brother. She could see the snow melting before her eyes. Northmen and Wildlings fled farther down the Kingsroad, trying to put as much distance between them and the fire as possible.

As soon as it began, it was over.

The trees to the north burned and crackled and snapped as they burned. Smoke billowed out around them. The Kingsroad had been blasted almost to nothing. Bits of bone stuck up out of the ground, blackened and charred, but it was all mostly ash. The ground was muddy and soft from the melted snow and ice. The side of her face felt raw and cracked from the heat, as if she had spent too much time in the sun.

There was a thundering sound, a great shaking of the earth, and she watched with wide eyes as Rhaegal landed before them, his roar deafening and terrible, his body crushing what remained of the trees around them. She looked behind her to see people cowering to the ground and hiding behind carts. Their bannermen stood tall but trembled at the sight of the dragon, gold eyes staring down at them, cold and calculating.

No one knew what to do.

Jon remained at the forefront of them all, still as a statue, returning the dragon’s gaze. His grip on his horse’s reins was iron-tight, and he kept the animal still and under control. Ser Jorah, the one who likely knew the dragon the best of any of them, could not keep his own wary nervousness from showing on his face.

Rhaegal roared again, and Arya flinched at the sound. She felt heat from it even though he breathed no fire.

“Go stand by Ser Jorah,” Jon murmured to her quietly. It was a command. She did as she was told, sliding off the back of his horse onto the ground, soft and muddy now from the melted snow. Her boots squished in the earth.

As soon as she was free, Jon directed his horse forward.

“What are you doing?” she hissed at him desperately, making to grab at the straps of the saddle in an effort to keep him back. He didn’t answer her, or make any sign that she had spoken at all.

The world was still as they all watched Jon approach the dragon. He removed his glove and carefully held out his hand. Rhaegal maintained a focused stare and Arya gaped in disbelief as Jon placed his hand on the dragon’s face.

It only lasted a moment, and then Jon flinched back as if it burned him, staring at his hand and then at
the green-scaled dragon.

Nobody moved. Nobody breathed.

And then, quietly, Jon murmured, “Thank you.” It was barely audible, carried softly over the wind.

Rhaegal roared again in response, shorter and with less heat. Jon quickly backed his horse up out of the way and back to the line. Arya grabbed onto his saddle as soon as it was in reach, wrapping her fingers tightly about the straps as if it would prevent him from doing more stupid, insane things.

She watched as Rhaegal soared into the sky, the boom of his wings pushing a great gust of wind and ash back against them as he took off from the ground, quickly becoming a small, dark shape on the horizon.

Arya looked up at her brother. His face was set in grim seriousness but his eyes were wild as they followed the dragon’s path into the clouds.

It was a long time before they stopped to make camp. Rests were brief and infrequent as they hurried southward; everyone was eager to put as much distance behind them as possible. It was still another day or two before they reached Winterfell, but the remaining journey would be through the open moors and so there was no risk of a surprise attack like the one they had suffered that morning.

Jon had spent the day riding through the caravan and Arya followed him, just as they’d done before, yet there was something different between them now. Yesterday she’d been desperate to talk to him, to get him to open up to her, to bridge the chasm that she could clearly feel widening between him and the rest of their family. She had wondered then if it was the pressures of being a king that kept him apart. Or the fact that they had all been separated so long that the old ties they’d felt as children were forever to be a memory.

And then, when she’d finally gotten him to speak to her, it turned out that wasn’t the case at all.

The night found her sitting at a small cookfire, arms around her knees as she brought them to her chest, sitting atop the basic bedroll she had brought. She stared into the flames absentmindedly and listened to the sounds of the others around her. Soft murmurings as people spoke together at other fires. The rustle of tents in the wind. The muted crunch of boots in snow as bannermen patrolled on watch.

“Are you alright?”

One such pair of boots belonged to Jon, and she tore her gaze from the fire as he took a seat at her side.

“Yes,” she replied. “But I will feel better once we’re home.”

Jon unbuckled Longclaw and laid the sword on the ground. “So will I,” he replied. The dim light of the fire emphasized the scars on his face. It made him look older, weary. She saw their father there, hiding in the background of his features, the way he held himself. The way he spoke. It was both familiar and strange to her. There was a darkness there. An absence of something. She couldn’t put her finger on what it was. “What?” he asked, noticing her stare.
“It’s just...something Sansa said to me,” Arya said. “Before you returned from the south. That you were different now.” The fire crackled between them. “I thought she was exaggerating. Or that she was just coming around to knowing you like I had, and attributed that change to you.” She looked from the fire to Jon. “But now I think I see what she means.”

“How is it a good or a bad thing?”

She thought about it for a long moment. “Neither, I guess?” she responded, not really sure how to convey her own feelings into words. “I don’t know.”

Silence settled between them.

“Listen,” he said, turning towards her with a serious expression. “The important things are still the same. I’m still your brother. You’re still my sister. There is nothing that will change that.” His tone was surprisingly adamant.

Arya returned his look. “We haven’t felt like family recently,” she admitted to him softly. “I know you were avoiding us.” Jon looked a bit crestfallen, but did not contradict her. “But I also know that you have other responsibilities now. You’re a king. It’s more than just your family that need you.”

“It doesn’t give me the excuse to behave as I have done,” Jon insisted. “And I’m sorry for it.”

“I hope you feel like you can trust us,” Arya urged. “You don’t have to carry everything yourself. We can be here for you like you are for everyone else. That’s what family is for. That is what I have missed.” She took a deep breath as she remembered the conversation they’d had that morning. It seemed like a lifetime ago. “What’s happening between you and Daenerys - I know you don’t want to talk about it, but you don’t have to keep that locked away. I’m here for you. And Sansa too.”

“I know.”

She fidgeted with hem of her cloak. “I promise I won’t say anything to anyone about it,” she said, feeling like she needed to make that point clear. “Not unless you want me to.”

Jon sighed. “Let’s just keep it between us for now,” he said quietly. “Daenerys and I have a lot to sort out between ourselves when I return.”

His voice had been laced with tension and anger when he’d spoke of the queen that morning, but now it held only a resigned melancholy. She reached out to place a hand on his in a silent gesture of support. They sat there in silence for a long while, listening to the sounds of the fire.

Arya was exhausted, but she knew she was far from sleep. Her mind cycled through memories of the earlier fight. The sound of bones shattering. The feeling of decaying hands grabbing at her clothes and hair and skin. The screams of both the living and the dead.

The numbing cold of the wind.

The heat of dragonfire.

In the distance, a wolf howled.
so I'm gonna have to admit that Arya is the hardest POV for me to do. I don't know what it is exactly, but getting her to sound right in this story is difficult and I'm still not confident that I'm doing it well. maybe by the end of this story I'll get the hang of it.

random poll: what is your favorite scene or episode from GOT and why? mine is Hardhome. like specifically when the Night King raises all those dead Wildlings and it's totally silent I freak the fuck out every time. so terrifying. and so good.
Daenerys V

Chapter Summary

Daenerys broods.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

**Daenerys V**

Her illness continued to remain a lingering shadow, which Daenerys found to be inconvenient and annoying. It was hard to maintain visibility and command when constantly fighting weakness and nausea. Up until just now, however, she had managed to hide it from everyone else.

Daenerys coughed, her throat burning as she retched ungracefully into what had previously been an empty chamber pot. Missandei was at her side, worried, her hands supporting her through the wave of dizziness that followed.

“Shall I get the maester, your Grace?” her advisor asked, concerned. Daenerys fell back onto her knees, leaning heavily against her friend on the stone floor.

“No,” she replied, her voice a bit rough. She kept her eyes closed as she tried to lessen the swaying of the room. Missandei held her up, sturdy and loyal and still. “I don’t want him putting me on bedrest again.”

“Perhaps that wouldn’t be such a bad idea,” Missandei replied her tone clearly indicating she did not agree with her. “If you’re still unwell-”

“There’s too much...to do,” Daenerys insisted, words punctuated with hard, slow breaths in an effort to keep down whatever still remained inside her. “I’ve been too long in this room already. We don’t know how long we have until the Night King is upon us.” She brushed wayward strands of hair back away from her face. “And Jon left.”

She was trying not to be angry about it. She knew his reasons, of course, and they were perfectly valid ones that she understood. The practical side of her agreed with his actions, and she knew she would have done the same had their positions been reversed. The emotional side, however, still struggled unsuccessfully with the unresolved tension between them. It was only getting worse as time passed.

You’ll forgive me if I take a bit longer to handle it as well as you appear to have done.

The words stung just as badly now, three days later, as they had done when he’d uttered them.

Daenerys took a deep, shaking breath as Missandei continued to hold her up, both of them kneeling together. The wave of nausea that had overtaken her earlier had now passed, and she felt a little better, a little clearer. She took back some of her own weight and held herself steady.

“I still think you should rest, your Grace,” Missandei urged. “Can I bring you anything?”
Daenerys shook her head. “I’m alright.” She stood upright on her own, though slowly, as if that would prove her point. Missandei followed suit, and Daenerys took her hands. “I appreciate your concern,” she said kindly. “And I promise that if I feel any worse I will send for the maester.”

“I will hold you to that promise” she said, not entirely mollified. “If you’re sure.”

“I am.” Daenerys tried to put as much strength and confidence in the words as she could muster. “And if you could, as a favor to me...please keep this to yourself.”

Her advisor held her gaze for a moment, but she eventually nodded in reluctant understanding. “Of course, your Grace.”

“Thank you.”

Some minor fuss was made then over her appearance; smoothing her grey coat and returning hair that had come loose back to its proper place. Missandei assisted her with this in companionable silence. Daenerys sat at the small table near the window while she did so and slowly sipped on some sweet wine to rid herself of the horrible aftertaste that came with being violently ill.

“Lord Tyrion wishes to speak with you this afternoon,” Missandei said after a while, her fingers tugging lightly in her hair as she redid one of her braids. Usually Daenerys had a Dothraki handmaiden do them for her, but she had been reluctant to have them with her while she remained ill, and instead opted for simpler braids that she and Missandei could do themselves in the interim.

“Did he tell you what he wished to speak about?” she asked, though she had a few guesses and none of them were conversations she particularly wanted to have.

Missandei paused slightly in the middle of the braid before continuing. “He did not say specifically,” she said, a bit cautious. “But I believe it is in regards to your betrothal.” Her advisor fastened off the last braid and came around to sit at the small table with her.

“Ah.” Daenerys responded. That had been at the top of her list of guesses. Her Hand, in his shrewdness of observation, had noticed the change between her and Jon and had, on several occasions, attempted to speak to her about it. She had been waving him off with various deflections, but it wouldn’t be long before she ran out of excuses.

She hadn’t spoken to anyone about it. She could barely handle the thoughts herself, trapped as they were in her own mind. The constant war of love and loss and anger all battled together in a confusing mess. Jon’s revelation and subsequent firm rejection of it, his pain, his sorrow - every part of her wanted to run to him, hold him up, tell him that everything would be alright. That they would get through it together.

That was what a loving wife-to-be was supposed to do, wasn’t it?

Daenerys tried to convince herself that the extenuating circumstances justified her request for separation. It was for the best of the realm, really. Targaryens controlled the dragons, so who would do so when she and Jon were gone? Drogon and Rhaegal would likely outlive her. And if more eggs were discovered...

Of course they would go to Jon’s children, as would her crown, should she win it.

“Is...everything alright?” Missandei asked, noting her long, brooding silence as she tried not to imagine what Jon’s future children with another woman would look like. She was just torturing herself now.
Daenerys sighed, wondering what she could say. “Jon and I disagreed, is all,” she said finally, simplifying the problem to near absurdity. “It’s yet to be resolved.”

“I see.”

Though it was carefully even, Daenerys detected the barest hint of...something. Was that doubt she heard? Or skepticism? “I would hear your thoughts, Missandei,” she said, raising her glass to her lips and taking another sip of the wine, shooting an arched eyebrow at her friend.

Her advisor let out a breath. “I can tell that your ‘disagreement’ is more than what you are letting on,” she said after a moment. “And the fact that you won’t say anything about it…” She trailed off, leaving the thought unfinished, but the end of it was clear without her having to say it.

“You suspect it’s personal,” Daenerys finished for her. “I’m sure Tyrion does as well.”

“Yes,” she said, sighing.

There was a knock on the door, light but firm, interrupting the conversation. Daenerys called for them to enter and was grateful for the distraction.

To her surprise, it was Sansa Stark that entered. “I hope I’m not interrupting anything,” she said. It was impossible to tell whether she meant the nicety or merely repeated it out of polite regard.

“Not at all,” Daenerys assured, gesturing for her to come in.

“I have something for you,” Sansa said after a moment of awkward silence, and held out the grey garment in her hands for her to take. “Arya brought this to me some time ago. I understand it is of significance to you.”

Daenerys stood and reached out to take it, one hand touching the grey fabric. She pulled it away from Sansa’s arms and watched the length of the cloak cascade downward, revealing familiar white stitching.

It was hard to keep the tears from her eyes. It was the cloak Jon had given her. “I thought it was beyond repair,” she murmured when she managed to finally find her voice.

“To be honest, so did I,” Sansa replied, stepping forward and taking a hem in her hand. “I had to replace quite a bit of it - see here?” She pointed to a tight seam that hadn’t been there before, barely visible. “I also extended the stitched design on the hem to mask some of the more...extensive repairs.” Sansa ran a finger along the white thread, pointing at where the original stopped and her work began. It was good; nearly impossible to notice. There was a long pause, and Sansa looked at her with an analytical curiosity. “Lord Umber said that you shielded him from fire.”

It wasn’t a request for confirmation, nor was it a suggestion of doubt. She had seen what the cloak had looked like. She knew the truth of it and had held it in her hands. To repair this as she had done, so thoroughly, and with such care...it must have taken a great deal of time.

“I-“ Daenerys started, then took a breath once she realized her voice was a bit choked from emotion. “I don’t know how to thank you for this,” she said honestly, running a hand along the soft fur of the collar. Some of it had been trimmed to cut away charred ends, but it had been cleaned and brushed to shine as if it were brand new.

“If you could put it on,” Sansa prompted. “So I can make sure the length is right?”

Daenerys nodded. “Of course,” she said, unable to keep the smile from her face as Missandei helped
her pull the cloak about her shoulders. The weight of it was heavy and comforting. As she crossed the leather straps across her chest, she noticed that they still bore signs of fire. Gingerly, she ran a fingertip along a darkened line. A rough spot in what was otherwise smooth leather.

“Those were still in good shape, mostly,” Sansa said, acknowledging where her attention had gone. “I thought it appropriate to leave them...as a reminder.”

“I’m not sure I’ll be forgetting it any time soon.” A dragon’s roar echoed in the vault of her mind, ghostly and pained.

There was a small upturn at the corner of Sansa’s mouth. “A reminder for others, perhaps,” she clarified. “The Northern lords seem to have a long memory for grudges, and a rather short memory for valor.” The hint of critique and frustration was heard plainly. “I’m not inclined to let them easily forget what you have done.”

There was another moment of silence as Sansa surveyed her handiwork. Daenerys assumed she was pleased with the result, as she wasn’t asked to remove it. The hem fell just short of the heel on her boots.

“It looks to be just right,” Daenerys said, still struggling to find the words to appropriately thank her.

“Consider it my gift to you,” Sansa replied. Then, after a brief pause, she continued. “Jon isn’t one to...” she trailed off, then started again. “What I mean to say, I think, is that gifts from Jon are a rare thing. I wanted to preserve the gesture as best I could.”

There it was, in the tones of her voice: a hint of acceptance.

Daenerys hoped her barely suppressed emotions were taken as gratitude and not despair. She could hardly bear to hear it. So she smiled instead, and played the part of happy betrothed.

It was an odd feeling; she’d never been a happy bride-to-be before. She’d been a terrified one with Drogo. And with Hizdahr...well there had been no feeling there at all. He had been a means to an end. A political arrangement and nothing more.

You could be a happy one now, she chided herself. You could marry for love. But you pushed it away instead.

A couple nights later, Daenerys found herself stuck in an endless loop of spiraling thoughts. The furs on the bed were warm and beckoning, yet sleep continued to elude her.

She sat at the small table near the hearth, a cup of mulled wine untouched in her hands. There had been no news of Jon or the caravan thus far. Sansa had shown little worry, but Daenerys struggled to accept her sense of calm. He’d been gone five days now, and each moment that passed had her feeling worse and worse.

She missed him.

Daenerys kept telling herself the pain would get better with time. The war would be won and her affair with the King in the North would be but a distant, treasured memory.
Nausea welled up within her again, though it was likely her own body reacting to her boldfaced lying to herself than actual illness. Her stomach tied itself in knots with anger and guilt. Why did doing the right thing feel so difficult? Why did duty need to come at the cost of love? She stared into the fire before her and wished it would give her clarity.

The fire crackled and popped in response, filling the silence.

After a long while, a strange scuffle and the sound of low murmured voices outside her door caught her attention. A glance at the lighted candle in the window showed it was quite late into the night. Curiosity got the best of her and she stood from her chair, setting the undrunk wine on the table and walking slowly to the door.

“Umbagon iemnŷ,” said the Unsullied guard at her door when she opened it. Stay inside. She barely heard the warning, her focus immediately going to the scene before her.

Ghost. His once white coat was streaked with dark brown and red, his ears flat against his head and a low growl in his throat.

“Apologies, your Grace,” a Northern voice said. “I tried to get him to go elsewhere, but for some reason he insisted on being here by your room.”

Daenerys opened the door fully to see the determined face of a young Stark bannerman as he regarded the direwolf in the hall with a wary expression.

“Put your weapon down,” Daenerys instructed her Unsullied guard with a gesture of her hand. Ghost stopped growling then, but remained agitated. She turned to the Northern man. “Has the king returned?” she asked him. Ghost had gone north with Jon. She’d watched them all depart.

He shook his head. “No word, your Grace,” he said. “Ghost showed up here on his own. Just walked through the gate a moment ago. I was hoping to get him cleaned up a bit, but he seems injured and won’t let anyone near him.”

Daenerys continued looking at the direwolf, not sure she was ready to think about what his presence here, alone and injured, could mean. Red eyes stared back at her and she wished she knew what was behind them.

Slowly, she reached out to let the wolf sniff her hand as she had done when they’d first met. Ghost took a limping step forward, a quiet, high pitched whine coming forth as he did so. Her heart broke at the sound.

She gently brushed back the fur on Ghost’s head with light fingertips. It was matted and rough to the touch. “Is there some way I can clean him up?” she asked the soldier, who was staring at the direwolf’s sudden submission with awe and confusion.

“We can take him to the Great Hall,” the man suggested. “The fire there should still be lit. Easy access to warm water.” He paused, and looked at Ghost again. “And it’s not too far of a walk.”

Daenerys nodded in agreement. “Then let’s proceed,” she murmured, mostly to the direwolf, and gently urged him forward in the proper direction.

Ghost complied at first with his slow pace and limping gait. The short walk through the keep to the inside of the Great Hall seemed interminable, and the closer they got the more she could feel Ghost leaning into her. She was getting increasingly worried, and sent the Northern soldier off to find the maester, hoping that he at least would be able to do something for him.
Daenerys pushed open the heavy door to the Great Hall, holding it steady for the wolf to pass through in front of her. It was dark and empty at this time of the night, but the fire burned quite steadily in the large hearth at the far end of the room. Daenerys turned to look at Ghost just in time to see him sway, then collapse. First his back legs, then his front legs. The red eyes were glazed as he lay upon the ground.

She rushed forward in horror. Ghost’s breathing was labored and shallow. A touch of her hand came away with blood, warm and wet and fresh. Daenerys looked to her Unsullied guard. “Help me,” she pleaded.

The wolf was large, and heavy, and it took both of them to get him up off the ground and onto one of the tables. Blood soaked through her dressing gown and night clothes in an instant. Her heart raced as she tried to figure out what to do. How did one help a direwolf?

The Northern bannerman returned shortly. “The maester is coming,” he said. “What can I-“

“Help us get him by the fire,” she said, hoping it was the right thing to do. It seemed right. Did direwolves get cold? Would it help?

The two men each picked up an end of the table and moved it to the front of the fire with some amount of strain. Daenerys laid a hand on Ghost, brushing fur back from his face with a tender motion. Tell me how to help you, she pleaded silently.

Red eyes stared back at her, baleful and searching and serious. A soft whine accompanied a struggled breath. She wanted to cry.

The main door opened, interrupting the tense silence, to reveal Sam Tarly.

Daenerys has only spoken to the man a handful of times. He was a man of the Night’s Watch, she knew. He had, until recently, been in Old Town studying to be a maester and was one of Jon’s truest friends.

Also, as Tyrion had informed her, he was the eldest son of Randyll Tarly, the man she had executed by dragonfire on Blackwater Rush some months before, along with the younger son, Dickon.

She still remembered their names without Tyrion’s reminder. She remembered how it felt to watch them burn. How they screamed, only for a moment, before collapsing into ash. Every minute detail was seared into her brain, not because she relished in it, but because she felt it necessary. She had taken lives, and even now, all this time later, she thought about that moment and all of its possible alternatives. Could it have been resolved without such finality? Maybe, maybe not. There was no way to know. What’s done is done, and it was up to her to live with the consequences of her decisions.

However, she was still left with the uncertainty of whether or not Sam himself knew what happened. He didn’t treat her as if he did, only responding to her presence with genuine respect and kindness. That was the part of it all that made her feel a bit ill; the fact that he may not know. It felt wrong for her not to address it, and yet she found herself a coward as she avoided seeking him out for the conversation she felt they needed to have.

The worst thing would be for him to find out from someone else after all this time, especially now that she herself knew the truth of it.

“I heard about Ghost,” Sam said, approaching the table with a worried look on his face. “Since he knows me, I thought being here might...help.”
“Has he ever been hurt like this before?” Daenerys asked, desperate for any sort of comforting news.

Sam shook his head. “Not that I’ve ever seen,” he said quietly. “Ghost is strong. I…” he trailed off, looking at the direwolf with sad eyes. “It would have taken an awful lot to bring him down like this.”

“Do you think Jon is in danger?” In her mind, she was already trying to figure out how long it would take her to throw on warmer clothes and the best way to climb upon Drogon. It would be painful to be astride him, but she was certain she could bear it.

There was a brief pause before Sam answered. “I don’t think Ghost would have left him and come here if he was,” he admitted, though he plainly wasn’t sure of his own answer. “And it’s possible that Ghost went off on his own, ran into some trouble, and thought it easier to come back here than to rejoin Jon again. He’s been known to run off.”

Daenerys tried to keep her head straight and calm, but her mind was running wild with all the awful scenarios it could be instead. She tried to push them away. Everything she imagined was so horrible, and each one of them led to the same conclusion.

*What if Jon did not return?*

The arrival of the maester shortly thereafter put the Northern bannerman to work. Warm water and clean cloths were brought to them. Daenerys busied herself with cleaning up Ghost as best she could, slowly clearing the white fur of grime and gore.

It was a large wound to his back and shoulder that seemed the most serious, and while the maester looked at it, she stayed by Ghost’s head so he could see her, murmuring comforting words to him. *iksā kostōba*, she repeated, over and over. *You are strong.*

Her fingernails were stained red, and water tinted with blood spilled from her hands as she rung out the cloth for what seemed like the hundredth time, her heart in her throat.

*You are strong.*

After what seemed like a lifetime, it was clear they had done all that they could do. The maester departed. Handmaidens from the kitchens took the bloody rags away. It was then just her and Sam in the large room, her Unsullied guard by the door, and Ghost.

The fire crackled loudly. Daenerys watched the labored rise and fall of Ghost’s breathing with tense anticipation, grateful for each one of them.

“I knew your great uncle,” Sam said after awhile, surprising her when he broke the silence. “Aemon Targaryen.”

“Yes, I learned recently he was in service to the Night’s Watch,” she acknowledged quietly. She didn’t know if it would cause her grief to hear of the man or not. Jon had spoken of him briefly, once. He’d told her what he remembered about the old maester at Castle Black, but also admitted that he didn’t truly know him as well as he would have liked, and had been unable to answer a lot of her questions.

“I was his steward,” Sam added. “Brought him his meals, helped him with the ravens, that sort of thing. He was a great man, and I admired him.”

She looked at Sam, noting the sincerity in his face. She didn’t quite know how to feel about it. “I wish we could have met.”
“He knew about you, and kept news of you the best he could,” Sam continued after a moment. “I would read his notes and letters to him- he was blind, I’m not sure if Jon told you that.” He paused a bit before continuing in a quiet, compassionate tone. “He heard about what you did in Essos. Freeing the slaves. Trying to make the world better. He was proud of you, and I just...wanted you to know that.”

Daenerys tried to blink away tears. It was a simple statement, but it struck her to her core. Family she didn’t know she had on the other side of the world cared for her, wanted to know her, had been proud of her and the things she had done. Something she’d always craved had been there all along, and she’d had no idea.

“Thank you for telling me,” she said, gratitude and guilt warring within her stronger than ever.

Sam smiled kindly at her. “If there’s anything you’d like to know, I’d be happy to speak of him whenever you wish,” he offered. “I am honored to have known him.”

Guilt was eating at her, clawing away at her insides. “I’m not sure I deserve your kindness,” Daenerys said quietly, wrenching her eyes from Ghost to look at Sam with seriousness. “I have to tell you something.”

Sam returned her look with one of confusion, eyebrows raised. “What is it?”

She took a deep breath, steadying herself. She had to say it now. She couldn’t, in good conscience, keep it from him after the gift he had just given her. “You are the son of Randyll Tarly, correct?” she asked quietly.

The confusion disappeared from his face immediately, replaced by...something else. A grim resignation.

“He already knew what she was going to say.

“I am,” he admitted. “And if this is about what happened to him, my mother wrote to me when I was in Old Town. You don’t have to say it.”

Her surprise only deepened. “If that’s true, then why-” She cut herself off, not quite which words she wanted to use.

“Why have I not reacted to you in anger?” he finished for her. “Why have I sat here with you knowing that you are responsible for the deaths of my father and brother?”

The words stung. “Yes,” she said. “You would be well within your rights to be.”

Sam sighed, looking briefly off to the fire behind her. “I won’t pretend that I’m not upset that it happened, because of course I am. Despite my father's many faults, I had no wish for him to die, nor for my brother to blindly follow him into it.” He turned back to her. “I’ve had time to deal with the grief in my own way. It helps nothing now to hate you for it. There are more important things.”

“But do you?” she asked. “Hate me for it?”

He regarded her for a long moment. “What purpose would that serve?” he asked.

Daenerys tried to pull herself up out of the pit of self-pity and anguish she had fallen in before she completely lost all control of herself. The past week had been a storm of heartbreak and anguish. Decisions reared the ugly head of consequence.
“It’s clear why Jon relies so heavily upon your counsel,” she said after a long moment.

Sam let out a breath and leaned back in his chair. “Oh I don’t know about all that,” he said, an awkward half-smile on his face, a clear attempt at dissipating the tension between them. “He’s pretty good at ignoring it just as well.”

Daenerys ran a hand along the top of Ghost’s head. His eyes were closed, but she didn’t know if the wolf was actually asleep or not. It must be well into the early hours of the morning now.

Time passed slowly, and the two of them settled into silence in their vigil over Ghost. Daenerys felt that the Great Hall was rather larger and more menacing at night when no one was in it; dark shadows stretching forth from the corners of the room and the dark vault of the ceiling, the deepest, blackest parts seeming to fade into nothingness. She shuddered and pulled her thick, fur-lined dressing gown tight about her, though she wasn’t particularly chilled.

It seemed like hours passed, though she couldn’t be quite certain of the time. The sky still remained dark outside, and it showed no signs of lightening with the dawn.

She hadn’t realized she’d fallen asleep until Sam spoke again.

“Jon has returned,” he was saying as she pulled her head up off the table, walking back from speaking to a Northern soldier by the door. Relief was plain in his voice and she felt similarly. The stress of worry left her in a long breath. Daenerys turned to Ghost, still on the table. He looked back at her with serious eyes. He already seemed to be doing better.

“You are strong,” she whispered to him again.

“I spoke to Lady Sansa earlier, while you were asleep,” Sam said quietly. She must have had a distraught expression, because he quickly continued. “We thought it best to let you sleep,” he said. “It wasn’t anything important. I just told her what had happened.”

Daenerys sighed and rubbed her face with her hands, once. “Where is she now?”

“Waiting for Jon in the courtyard,” he said. “He’ll be up here soon.”

Ghost whined, a soft, pitiful noise. He could tell that Jon was near and wanted to go to him. “Hush now,” she whispered. “He will come to you.” With a tender, smoothing motion, she pet the fur atop his head. She turned to Sam. “Will you stay with him until Jon arrives?” she asked. “I think I’d like to go and...clean myself up.” She wasn’t ready to see Jon right now. She needed some time away from the urgency of the night to gather herself, to remember why she insisted they remain apart. If she saw him now...well, it probably wasn’t a good idea.

Thankfully, Sam didn’t know her well enough to see through the excuse, and he nodded assuredly. “Go on,” he said. “I will tell Jon what you have done.”

She shook her head. “That’s not necessary,” she murmured as she rose, her injured side stiff and aching from sitting in the chair all night. Daenerys felt like she needed to say something to him, to acknowledge the night that transpired, but everything that came to mind felt trite and insufficient. Only a brief nod of respect was managed before she made her way to the side door, slipping out into the dark hallway of the keep.

Her Unsullied guard was sent away with instructions to tell Missandei of what had occurred in the night so that she could tell the rest of her council, and she wove her way through the empty halls of the keep alone, her slow pace impeded only by the slight limp that she was trying desperately to overcome.
She had almost made it to her room when she heard his voice.

“Daenerys.”

Jon called to her from down the hall; he’d clearly run to catch her. His eyes grew wide as she turned to face him and he saw her ruined clothes.

“I’m glad to see you returned,” she replied, trying to sound calm and reserved, as if she hadn’t stayed up most the night with her emotions frayed past their breaking point.

He didn’t reply to her, instead he strode forward to close the distance between them in four quick paces, took her face in his hands, and kissed her fiercely.

She lost herself in it despite her better judgement. It was easy to want something so freely offered; a kiss and a promise of a life they could have together. It was so easy to slip back into how things were. An easy embrace, a comfortable companionship. She craved it with every part of her. Wouldn’t it be so simple to bring him into her room? Wouldn’t it be easier to sleep when he was in bed beside her?

A tear carved a too-familiar path down the side of her face.

Chapter End Notes

so I broke my one month streak of updating every weekend (i’m so proud of myself tho) but once again I had to work some hella overtime because being an adult is the wooooooorst

hope the conversation between Daenerys and Sam seemed reasonable and in character. I felt that it had to be addressed sooner rather than later, and hopefully I was able to do it justice.

as always, let me know your thoughts. i like talking to you guys.
Jon VI

Chapter Summary

Jon and Daenerys try to compromise.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Jon VI

It probably would have been better to talk first.

There was so much pain and heartache and love and anguish that it was hard to pull one emotion from the rest. He hadn’t intended it to go this far. His thoughts when Sam told him what she had done for Ghost hadn’t materialized much more than wanting to see her. He’d chased her down through the halls with only that in mind. The kiss was spur of the moment, unplanned, a seized opportunity.

This was probably not going to help the situation they were in, but he didn’t really care. It had all been too much. The fight, the anger, the tension, it all melted away for just a brief moment in time where he could pretend everything was fine. A step, a response, and repeat until he had her up against the door, a wordless conversation taking place between them.

He was caught up in the feel of her, the taste of her lips and the scent of her hair. Her hands were warm and soft on his skin and he burned for her. With each breath, each kiss, he waited for her to stop him, to push him away, to tell him that they shouldn’t be doing this, but she didn’t.

Well, not right away.

Daenerys was the first to break their embrace, though instead of the regret he anticipated, all he could see was fire in her eyes. Without a word, she turned the handle on the door and pushed it open with one hand, hooking the fingers of the other into his belt to bring him inside, making her intentions perfectly clear.

“I know we should probably talk,” she murmured as the door closed behind him, her tone indicating that she was just as interested in that idea as he was. She untied her robe with one swift motion and dropped it to the floor. “But I don’t really want to.”

“There’s time enough for that later,” he managed to respond before she kissed him again, a long and lingering one that made his heart pound hard in his chest.

Her practiced fingers unbuckled first his sword belt and then his gorget without breaking contact. She then began work on his vambraces, pulling them off one at a time to join them on the floor. The gambeson was next, and then the quilted padding underneath, and he watched, entranced, as her fingers undid the laces with nimble efficiency.

It, too, soon fell to the ground.
He held her close, running his hands from her hips to her waist to the small of her back over the thin shift she wore. He wanted to tear it off so he could feel her skin, bare and warm and soft. Hands crept up under his shirt, fingertips gliding across him like fire, passing over the scars there with tenderness and care. A moment later, the shirt was gone.

“I love you,” she whispered as they fell onto the bed in a tangle of limbs and sighs and passion. “I love you.”

He gently rolled on top of her and captured her lips. “I know you do,” he murmured against them, and then they both lost themselves in each other.

Afterwards they lay entwined, furs thrown over them carelessly, and he tried to remember the last time they had lain together. It must have been White Harbor. A stolen evening weeks ago filled with quiet amusement; an opportunity to enjoy each other in a bed that didn’t sway with a ship.

Daenerys was tucked up into him. He could feel her breath against the skin of his neck, and at first he wasn’t sure if she had fallen asleep or not. Then he began to feel her fingers brushing soft, wandering lines across his chest.

It was calm, comforting, wonderful...and it made his heart ache.

“Do we have to be anywhere right now?” she asked, her lips brushing against him as she spoke.

“No.” He’d asked Sansa and Davos to organize a war council for midday in an effort to give him and Arya and Jorah some time to recover from the straight two days and two nights of riding they had just done.

“Good.”

They lay together for a long while, not speaking, and through the window he could see that the sun had officially risen. He ran his hand along her body, tracing the edges of it in slow, lazy strokes. The curve of her waist. The line of her hip. The firmness of a linen bandage wrapped tight about her.

A reminder.

She noticed that he lingered on it. “I’m alright,” she whispered, placing a kiss of reassurance to his shoulder.

“That’s good to hear.”

She propped herself up on an elbow to look down at him, eyes searching, hair mussed and cascading over one shoulder.

“I’ve missed you,” she said quietly.

“Aye,” he agreed, running his hand lightly down her arm to the hand that splayed across his chest, gathering up the fingers to press a light kiss to them. “And I, you.” He sighed and looked up at her. “I wanted to thank you,” he said after a moment. “What you did for Ghost…” he trailed off, trying not to think of her bloodied clothes and the state his direwolf must have been in. “That was my intention in coming to you. To say...thanks.”

There was a hint of a smile to her face. “Well, you did quite a thorough job,” she said, teasing.

He grinned at her. “You undressed me,” he pointed out.
“Yes, I suppose I did.” She smiled at him, but he could see the sadness there. “Ghost came to me for help,” she replied, serious again. “So I helped him.”

He had thought his direwolf dead when Ghost did not rejoin them on the road. The sound of him in the forest as wights surrounded them had haunted him in a swirling storm of grief and guilt since it happened.

In his mind he also saw Arya go down, over and over, pulled to the ground by dead men. He’d never been so terrified in his life than he’d been in that moment, and it had been a harsh reminder for him on what really mattered. He’d been so caught up in his own anger and self-loathing that he’d been pushing away his own family, and now at the end of the world it was family that was the most precious thing to him. They hadn’t survived and suffered alone for so many years just for Jon himself to be the one tearing them apart again.

Whether they had shared parents or not, that’s what they were. Siblings. The truth couldn’t erase that.

What the truth was erasing, however, was whatever life he and Daenerys could have together.

*Jon, you must set me aside.*

“Talk to me,” Daenerys whispered, noting he had retreated into himself. Her hand squeezed his in comforting reassurance.

He sighed as he looked up at her, an ache in his chest. “Our last proper conversation still weighs heavy on my mind,” he said quietly, rising slowly to sit up against the headboard, the stiffness of his muscles reminding him sharply of the hard riding he had done.

She sat up as well, bringing the furs with her as she did so. “I wish there was another way,” she replied, pain in her voice echoing his own as she spoke. “But I cannot allow the Targaryens to end because of me. Not if it doesn’t have to happen. It’s too important.”

Jon took a deep breath. “More important than being together?” He knew what she was going to say, and he didn’t want her to say it aloud. Yet, he asked it anyway.

There was a long pause before she answered. “Yes,” she said quietly. “I’m sorry.”

It hurt, even though he knew it was coming. “Me too,” he replied with a sigh.

“You’re not going to fight me on this?”

He turned to look at her. “Would it help if I did?” he asked, not expecting an answer. Violet eyes stared back at him. “Fighting amongst ourselves is the last thing we need right now,” he murmured quietly. “I yield.”

She closed her eyes, and a tear ran down her face. He hated it. He hated the situation. He hated the truth of it all. It was a strange situation to be in; in bed together but no longer together in the way that they had hoped to be. It was exhausting to experience in the same moment both the intense, emotional high of sex and the absolute lowest of low moods that was the result of an unwanted separation.

Daenerys seemed to be struggling in much the same fashion, and he watched her face as she looked at him, eyes flicking from his eyes to his mouth both in want and in indecision.

Perhaps he should get dressed.
His eyes had barely looked about the room for his clothes when she grabbed his face and kissed him again. It was searing and desperate as she moved to sit astride him. He grabbed her hair and held it behind her with one hand, and wrapped the other about her waist.

“What happens when we leave this room?” she asked, her voice a whisper. “How can we bear it?”

He returned her kiss with one of his own, feeling the heat of her against him, her hands on his face and in his hair and against his chest. Jon leaned his head back against the headboard behind him, as if it would ground his thoughts to the sturdy oak and give him clarity.

“We don’t have to make a decision right now,” he said quietly.

Daenerys pulled away slightly to regard him. “What do you mean?”

“I’m asking you for time,” he clarified, leaning forward to place a kiss to her collarbone. “You’re talking about a problem that will only exist if we win this war, so let’s...win the war first.”

_I’d like a chance to prove you wrong._

“Won’t that just make it harder?” she asked quietly, her fingers brushing along the side of his face. “I can barely stand the idea of you leaving this room. If we continue on like this…” she trailed off. “It would be a worse pain than it is already.”

He looked at her seriously, running his hands up her back to hold her close to him. “Daenerys, I’ll gladly suffer it if it means we’re still alive to do so,” he said intensely and honestly. “Please, just...stay with me until it’s over. We can sort it out when our people are safe.”

There was a long moment between them, and then she nodded. “Alright,” she whispered.

That was all he needed. They came crashing together again, and he lost himself in her.

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He was nearly late to the war council he had asked for. Leaving Daenerys had proved difficult, and once he managed to do so, scrubbing himself down in the baths had also taken considerably more time than he intended. The smell of her still lingered on him, intoxicating, distracting, a distinct smell of flowers that he only associated with her. It was strange and wild. She told him once that it was a perfume from Essos that she had found. It was so unlike anything he’d ever known.

When he left his own chambers, hair still a bit damp but dressed again in fresh clothes, his mind felt clearer than it had in weeks.

Jaime, Tyrion and Grey Worm were already in the place that had been unofficially designated as a war council room. The three of them were arguing over a drawing of the northern walls of Winterfell, wooden pieces denoting troops of archers scattered about haphazardly.

“Perhaps Grey Worm is right,” Tyrion was saying to his brother. “You should listen to him. He did take Casterly Rock from you after all.”

Jaime looked down at Tyrion, clearly annoyed. “Only because I let you do it,” he replied. “You may be clever, but when it comes to this sort of thing I will outsmart you every time.”

Jon made his way across the room, leaving them to it. As he approached the farthest wall, he found himself missing the grand painted table on Dragonstone. Here in Winterfell, all he had was the largest map of the North that he could find, framed and hung up, marked with charcoal in various places with Xs and dates. Significantly less impressive.

“Jon,” Tyrion said as he reached the map, grabbing one of the charcoal sticks from the small table below it. “We’re having a debate about the archers.”

It was a request for his input. “We can talk afterwards,” he said, looking up at the painted version of his home. Winterfell was the most detailed part of it, each round tower drawn with careful precision, the walls and Wintertown outlined to surround it. And there, at the center, a single tree colored a faded red.

His eyes followed the thick line of the Kingsroad north, past the moors, the Wolfswood, and to the west side of the Long Lake. Trees were drawn along it here, simple and sparse, the complete opposite of how it had truly been in reality.

His sisters were the next ones to enter the room, one after the other, followed by Ser Davos.

“What day was it?” he asked Arya without preamble when she approached. He only briefly glanced her way before focusing back to the place where the Kingsroad snaked its way through those trees. “Or rather, what day is it now? Everything has blurred together.”

Arya held her hand out for the charcoal, and he gave it to her. It was almost out of arm's reach for her, but she stood on the tips of her toes and put a firm X in the southern half of that forest, and underneath she wrote the date of four days back.

It had seemed like much longer.

“You don’t look like you rested at all,” Arya remarked to him.

“I didn’t.”

Arya regarded him with a frown. “You should take your own advice once in a while,” she admonished. “Before you collapse.”

“I’ll rest later,” he promised. His sister remained unconvinced but did not press him further about it.

Daenerys walked in shortly thereafter, followed by Jorah, Missandei, and Lord Varys, and as they closed the door, Jon was suddenly struck by the strangeness of the room.


And him.

Would he count himself a Stark? The world thought him as such. The bastard son of the great Northern lord, though, as it turned out, he was neither of those things.

Would he count himself a Targaryen then? Truth it may be, but it felt wrong to him too.

No, he thought to himself. I am a Snow.

I am of the North.
Jon sighed, and took back the charcoal from Arya. All eyes in the room were on him, waiting for him to speak.

He pointed to the X that Arya had drawn. “About a hundred dead men attacked us on the road, here,” he said. “Four days ago. They were once Northmen, and had not come from beyond the Wall.” He paused, letting the words take effect before he continued. “Some of them had clearly dug themselves up out of the ground.”

Silence greeted this news. Jaime’s eyes were fixed hard in the X, face grimly set. “What does that mean for us?” he asked.

“It means we don’t have time to linger over our dead,” Jon replied flatly. “They must be burned. No exceptions.”

“Jon…” Sansa interrupted, sounding neutral but her worried eyes betrayed her. “What about the crypts?”

He’d already thought about this. “Go down and pay your final respects,” he said to her and Arya, trying not to imagine the skeletal hands of a thousand years of ancestors reaching out from behind that door. “And then seal it shut.”

“How long do you think we have?” Daenerys asked, looking at the map. “It wasn’t the main army that you saw?”

Jon shook his head. “We know that Last Hearth is now abandoned and the Night King is making his way south, but I didn’t see any of his main host. They move slowly but they don’t have to stop and rest.” He looked at the map again, trying to ignore the cold, sinking feeling of dread in his chest. “I don’t think we have more than a month, at best. And at worst…” he trailed off. “At worst, a fortnight.”

“I’m not sure we can finish building what we need to build in a fortnight,” Jaime said.

“I brought near to a thousand men and Wildlings here this morning,” Jon pointed out. “Put them to work.”

“And what do we do with the ones who cannot work or fight?” Ser Davos asked.

“Send them to Dragonstone,” Daenerys said, speaking before Jon had a chance to process the question. “My ships are still in White Harbor. They will take anyone who wishes to go. My home is theirs.”

It was so heartfelt and so genuine that Jon had a difficult time not letting his affection for her show too plainly on his face.

“Thank you,” he said quietly.

“I will send Lord Varys with them, and Missandei,” Daenerys replied. There was no reaction from either one at the words; she must have spoken to them about it previously. “She will act on my behalf and with my authority to run the island, and, if necessary, defend it. Lord Varys and...those in his employ will keep an eye on the south from there and send reports as necessary.”

“How soon?” Sansa asked. “When can we start sending people to White Harbor?”

“As soon as possible, I would guess,” Daenerys replied. “We shouldn’t waste any time.”
“Ten days,” Jon emphasized. “Anyone not able or willing to fight needs to be out of here in ten days. No more.”

“I’ll handle it,” Sansa said.

Jon looked to Davos. “Where are we on the dragonglass?” he asked.

“We’ve got the cross-posts done,” Davos said. “And every Northman and Dothraki carries at least one dragonglass weapon.”

“The Unsullied have glass spears,” Grey Worm added.

“Good,” Jon said. He turned to Ser Davos again. “Focus on making arrowpoints. They fly different than traditional iron and we need our archers to practice.”

“Aye, your Grace, I’ll see to it.”

Jon sighed, and looked back to Jaime and Tyrion. “Is there anything we won’t be able to complete in the time we have left?” he asked.

Jaime shook his head. “We’ve prepared the best we can.”

“Hopefully it’s enough.”

As the sun set, Jon found himself on the northern wall, alone. The moors looked peaceful and calm as they spread out before him, and if not for the dark lines of trenches and the cross-posts below was almost easy to pretend there wasn’t a war coming.

He had addressed the Northern lords that afternoon, telling them everything that had been discussed, and thankfully it had gone on with little to no disruption or argument. The end was nearing, and they could see it now. The arrival of the refugees from Last Hearth, and the stories they brought with them, had sobered them up more than anything Jon could have said.

A roar echoed faintly across the landscape, but it was loud and distracting in his mind.

Rhaegal, he knew.

He’d not told Daenerys what had happened, though he expected that Jorah would do so eventually. Jon was still struggling with the incident himself; confused, terrified, anxious...and, in the back of his mind, there was also a comforting, peculiar calm. At the time, all he knew was that he was desperate for any sort of help, anything at all, looking for a way to save his people and his sister at any cost. He called out to whatever gods that there were that listened, and it was Rhaegal who answered.

He could feel the heat of it burning in his mind, feel the overwhelming force of the dragon’s presence, brighter and sharper than it had ever been. He remembered the sense of belonging when he touched the green scales, the shock as it snapped into place. That hadn’t happened when Drogon allowed him to touch him back on Dragonstone. There had been nothing there except awe and terror on his part.

Now...it was like having someone else in his mind all the time, a burning shadow. You are a Targaryen, it constantly screamed to him, a clear, undeniable confirmation.
He sighed. His hope that he could pretend the truth did not exist was quickly withering away. He clung to the Stark sigil on his armor, as if it were a wall that he could use to hide from the truth.

*I belong here, don’t you see?*

Rhaegal swooped low over the tops of the Wolfswood before disappearing back into the clouds again. Through their connection he could feel the air whooshing past him as he soared. It called to him, and he did his best to ignore it.

How long would that last?

Soft footsteps announced that he was no longer alone, and he turned to see Daenerys approaching him. She did not speak at first, but stood at his side and gazed northward with him, close enough that their arms touched. It was casual and comforting. That sense of belonging came back to him in full force.

“I spoke with Ser Jorah just now,” she said after a moment of silence. “About you. And Rhaegal.”

Her tone indicated that she had guessed exactly what had happened and was waiting for him to confirm. He turned to look at her. “What did he say?” he asked, curious to know if Jorah suspected anything.

“That Rhaegal came to your aid. Saved your lives,” she replied, looking to him for confirmation. “And allowed you to approach him.”

Jon looked at her. “Yes,” he replied. “He did.”

“I didn’t send him,” she said pointedly. “Rhaegal. It wasn’t my doing.”

“I know,” he murmured. His mouth felt a little dry. “I think it was me.”

There was silence at his words. He continued staring ahead, not meeting her eyes.

“Tell me what happened,” she asked, her voice calm and gentle and assuring. Jon felt her hand reach out to grasp his, and he let her.

“I thought I was about to watch my sister die,” he said after a long moment. “We were trapped in the forest and we weren’t able to regroup enough to escape. I needed help, and Rhaegal was just...there.” He sighed, and finally turned to look at her. “Afterwards, I could feel him calling for me somehow, and when I touched him...” he trailed off. “Well, I’m sure you can guess what happened.”

She regarded him with compassion. “He chose you,” she said, confirming a suspicion he’d been trying to ignore for days.

Anxiety pooled in his chest, and he turned back to the moors. Despite her calm encouragement, Jon still felt sick about it. “I didn’t want him to,” he said.

“I know,” she said. “But it is your birthright.”

He let out a breath. “That’s still hard to hear.”

Daenerys answered only with a light caress of his hand, a reassuring gesture that went no further, but it was something that calmed him immensely. He focused on it and let the silence build between them while he struggle to gather his whirling thoughts.

“If Viserion had a rider, would he have lived?” he asked her quietly. The question had been plaguing
him for days, and he was terrified of the answer.

Daenerys stared out over the moors, shoulders bowed as she leaned against the stone crenellation. “No,” she said simply. “It would not have changed the outcome.” He watched as she tucked a loose lock of hair behind her ear. “Dragons are not like horses,” she said. “They don’t need us to guide them. Being able to ride one is less out of necessity for control and more a…privilege, I suppose. They allow us to do so out of respect for whatever bonds us to them.” She sighed. “This is all just my own speculation, however,” she admitted, turning to him. “I’ve not encountered anyone that could answer my questions.”

“Then I’m lucky that I have you,” Jon replied. “I’m not sure I could handle this on my own.” In some way, he was relieved at her answer. If it would spare Rhaegal’s life to have a rider, then he would try his best do it, regardless of what it would reveal about his heritage. Daenerys couldn’t lose another dragon because of him.

She smiled in response, but it quickly faded. “You’re not as troubled by this as I expected you to be,” she noted.

He let out a breath, and he watched it fog up and dissipate in the cool air before responding. “I won’t say that I’ve come to terms with it,” he replied. “But the anger I felt is gone. Nearly losing Arya put a great number of things into perspective.”

Daenerys stepped forward. The setting sun behind him made her hair seem to glow warm and bright. “That explains our conversation this morning,” she said quietly.

“I didn’t yield to you because I agree with you,” he said. “I just want to make that perfectly clear.”

“Then why did you?”

Jon paused before answering. “Because I’m selfish,” he said finally. “Because I want every last moment with you that I can get before the end.” She didn’t seem to catch on to what he was implying, and so he clarified. “And I don’t mean the end of our betrothal.”

He saw understanding fall across her face, even through her effort to keep herself composed. “You speak so easily of your own death?” she asked quietly.

“Dying is easy,” he said flatly. “It’s living that’s hard to do.”

The next couple days were chaotic. Wagons and carts filled with young children, their mothers, and those too old or too frail to fight began to trundle their way down the Kingsroad with any supplies they could spare.

Jon stood in Wintertown as families were pulled apart, sons and daughters and mothers and fathers all saying goodbye. He helped hand young children to waiting arms, assisted the elderly to a place on the backs of wagons, lifted crates of food and dragonglass until his back and shoulders ached from the strain.

It was a somber mood all around, but he had to help. He had to be here and experience the consequences of his commands. How many people here wouldn’t see their families again? How many homes was he breaking apart?
Daenerys was farther along down the road, having some Dothraki assist with repairing a broken cart. It was almost comical, in a desperate sort of way. Dothraki in Wintertown.

He wished he could tell Robb; he could almost hear his laughter. An echo of a memory in his mind.

“Samwell Tarly you will not make me leave.” Gilly’s voice cut through the noise, and Jon turned to see his friend standing with his family close by, a serious expression on his face.

“Go south, go to Dragonstone,” Sam urged. “Take care of Little Sam.”


Sam closed his eyes briefly and sighed. “I’m sorry,” he said firmly, regarding her with confident sincerity. “I have to stay. I swore a vow.”

Gilly let out a half-suppressed sob, and then, to Jon’s chagrin, she turned to face him, Little Sam in her arms and tears in her eyes. “Tell Sam to go south,” she demanded of him desperately. “Please.”

Jon wanted to be anywhere but in this moment. He looked at Sam, who already knew what he was going to say, and then to Gilly, open expression begging for him to help her. “I can’t,” he murmured, an apology in every note of his words.

“Why not?” she demanded. “You are a king, aren’t you? Order him to leave!”

“I’m not the king of the Night’s Watch,” he said, hating the despair that shone in her face as he answered. “I’m sorry.”

He knew that Sam would leave if he told him to, regardless of whether Jon had the authority over him or not, but he couldn’t bring himself to do it. Sam wouldn’t want him to, even if it meant he could live out the rest of his days on Dragonstone with his family. Like Sam had said, he swore a vow, and he took that vow seriously, and Jon was not going to dishonor his friend by forcing him to abandon it.

A tear ran down Gilly’s face as her last desperate attempt crumbled before her. Sam stepped forward and embraced her tightly. “I’ve written to my mother,” he said to her as she cried. “I’ve told her what is happening here and where you’re going. If you are in any trouble at all, you go to them and they will help you. Do you understand?”

Gilly took a shallow, shuddering breath, and nodded. “I do.”

“Good,” Sam said, and Jon could hear the false confidence in his voice, trying to sound strong and unworried. He leaned forward and kissed Little Sam on the forehead. “Be good for your mother,” he said.

Little Sam reached out with both arms, wordlessly asking for Sam, and when Sam did not immediately hold him, the usually silent boy made an insistent noise.

“We have to go now,” Gilly said to her son, wiping a tear from her face. “We’ll see Papa again soon.”

“Papa,” Little Sam repeated, staring hard at Sam.

To Jon’s knowledge, Little Sam had yet to speak until now, even though he was well past the age to do so. Sam has remarked in passing that the little boy learned things a bit later than most children, but
despite the delay he seemed otherwise well despite the nature of his origins.

Judging by the reaction of both Sam and Gilly, this was the first clear word the boy had spoken.

Sam was near to his breaking point, and Jon’s heart went out to his friend. He stood close by as Gilly finally relented and stepped into the back of the waiting wagon, watched as Sam waved to his family as they departed, and felt the pain of it all once more as Little Sam called out again for his father, the small voice carrying over the wind.

They stood together in silence for a long moment after the wagon had disappeared. Jon glanced down the road to where he’d seen Daenerys before, and her eyes were already on him. He could tell by her expression that she had seen and heard it all.

Chapter End Notes

yep, just me making up more stuff re: magic dragon connection. I will admit that I am mostly a show watcher. I read only A Game of Thrones and nothing after so if there is more to it in the later books how about we just ignore that and pretend I know what I'm talking about here

feel free to comment thoughts/feelings/incoherent ramblings/favorite dessert
She woke in her room at Dragonstone.

It was a bright day; sunny, cloudless, and tendrils of a warm breeze blew in from the open balcony. The sheer curtains drifted lazily inward. She stretched and rose from the bed, reaching out to grab a light dressing gown that was carefully folded and draped over a nearby chair. It looked like something she had left behind in Essos, a thin garment with bright blue details along the neck and hem. It was soft, like silk, and it felt nice against her skin.

Barefoot, she padded softly over to the balcony and brushed back the curtains with one hand to step out into the warmth of the morning sun. She could smell the salt of the ocean. In the distance, a dragon flew down from the clouds to touch the water and return to the sky, the echo of it’s joyful trill faint on the air.

Home...and yet it wasn’t.

She sighed and closed her eyes to savor the feeling, taking a deep breath. It was warm and soothing to be here and she was filled with a contentment. Still, something was off to her; a niggling sense in the back of her mind and the corners of her heart. This is wrong, it whispered. This is wrong.

Behind her, the echo of a child’s laughter reached her ears and she turned in curiosity, banishing the darkness away. As she entered her bedroom again she saw a door to the right, cracked slightly to reveal a sliver of the space beyond. A flash of dark hair ran past the opening, and the youthful sound of the child was accompanied by the lower tones of a man’s answering amusement. Silently, Daenerys walked forward to push open the door and gaze into the adjoining room.

It clearly belonged to a child. The furniture was small and colorful. Carved wooden toys of various shapes and sizes were strewn about haphazardly across one section of the floor. A bright rug was in the center and a man sat upon it, relaxed, listening intently to the small girl as she brought him different toys, chattering in the animated, nonsensical way that very small children did when they were still grasping the basics of language.

“Hush now, little dragon, or you’ll wake your mother,” the man murmured, his voice familiar.

“I’m afraid it’s too late for that,” Daenerys replied from the doorway, both aware that she was responding and yet also feeling as if she were watching herself do so. This is wrong, the darkness whispered again. You can’t have children.
The man turned at the sound of her voice and it was Jon’s face that greeted her, alight and carefree and as relaxed as she’d ever seen it. He scooped the child up into his arms, and as Daenerys strode forward to meet them, she saw clearly that the little girl was his mirror image. Same dark hair, same grey eyes.

His child.

*Their* child.

Wrong wrong wrong.

She was so elated at the image before her that it seemed like she could glow as bright as the sun. She smiled at them and Jon stood to bring the child to her. He spoke, but she didn’t understand what he was saying. The all-consuming joy she felt was overriding all of her senses, the feeling of dread that tugged at her was pushed back and ignored. There was no need to worry. Everything was fine.

He was halfway across the room when the sky outside began to darken suddenly, and the light and happiness she felt began to ebb away. How could it be dark so fast? She had just been outside not a moment ago and there had been no clouds.

Jon didn’t react to the incoming darkness at all and continued to hold their daughter in his arms. The air became cold and biting and she felt panic grip her.

“*Hurry,*” she called to them, her arm outstretched. “*Hurry.*”

It was too late. Behind them, the Night King strode out of the shadows. Jon was turned away, still holding their child-

But no...the little girl was gone. She tried to scream at Jon to turn, to fight, but he just looked towards her as if there was nothing wrong, unarmed and unconcerned.

Tears stung her eyes as she watched the Night King get closer. She struggled against some unseen force that held her on her place, and watched helplessly as a spear pushed its way through Jon like parchment. Blood blossomed on his shirt as he looked down at it in shock, falling to his knees. She screamed and it ripped her throat to pieces.

“It’s alright,” she heard Jon murmur, though the words didn’t match his lips when they moved.

“Daenerys-“

The Night King removed his spear from Jon and she watched, horrified, as he crumpled to the ground. The tip of the spear dropped red, splashing onto the child’s toys that still littered the ground. She couldn’t breathe.

“Daenerys!” Jon still called to her, his voice echoing around the room in distress, and yet his body lay still and lifeless on the ground.

Her lungs burneded. She needed air.

The room was dark. Daenerys fell to her knees.

“Mother.”

She turned her head sharply to see the dark haired girl standing next to her, older now, her face level with hers.
Instead of grey, a glowing blue stared back at her now.

Daenerys woke up sharply, her heart pounding hard in her chest as the need to flee still dominated her instincts, her breath coming in ragged, desperate gasps. The familiar stone ceiling loomed above her, colored in a dim, shadowy orange as the dying fire cast it’s light about the room.

Jon’s room.

She turned to see him still asleep at her side, on his stomach and facing away from her. The muscles of his back were accented by the shadows, clear and unmarred by the tragedy of her dream. She used the sight to calm herself, taking in each curve and ridge; the curl of his hair, the jut of his shoulder. Yet still the dream persisted.

Mother.

She blinked back tears as her mind repeated the word over and over, showing her the sight of the child, giving her the feeling of completeness that had all been part of that horrible scene. It had not been the first time she had dreamt of Jon’s death and this version of it was worse than the others. There was a pain in her chest as if she herself had been the one to take the blow.

The candle on the table told her that it was the early hours of the morning. She knew that her racing heart would keep her up for hours yet, so she resigned herself to rising earlier than usual.

She tried her best to rise from the bed with care so as not to disturb Jon, still fast asleep. Her dressing gown was thrown haplessly over the trunk at the end of the bed and she wrapped it about herself before going over to stoke the fire back to life.

It had been eight days since Jon had returned with the refugees, and since then they had spent each night together, unable to stay apart, and unable to talk about it. A routine of sorts had been established: they would go about their separate business during the day, and at night she would steal away into his room and seek the welcoming comfort of his embrace. They weren’t discreet, and she didn’t care. Say what they will; it didn’t matter.

The memory of the little girl still burned sharply in her mind, and that, coupled with reality, was enough to send her into a dark mood. She walked back to the bed, though she stayed atop the bedclothes and leaned against the headboard. The fire crackled in the silence and she searched for clarity. The dream would not leave. It clawed at her, tortured her. Over and over it played until she felt her fingernails digging into her palm as she clenched her fist.

She wished she had the strength to stay away.

Jon stirred, and she turned to look at him beside her.

“What’s wrong?” he asked, noting her mood immediately. He rose to sit beside her.

“Troubling dreams,” she replied, trying to focus on him being here with her, alive and real, with his grey eyes that regarded her now with loving concern, shared by a dream of a daughter that could never exist.

Mother.
The grey eyes turned blue again in her mind and she shuddered. Her throat felt dry and her skin felt cold.

Jon pulled her close, folding her into a warm embrace. “Do you want to talk about it?” he asked her quietly.

“Not really,” she whispered, closing her eyes to focus on the warmth of his skin, the beating of his heart beneath her hand and the roughness of the scar he bore there. “I’d sooner forget it.”

There were no young children in Wintertown anymore. It was more a place for soldiers now than the populated town it had been when she’d first arrived. Northmen, Unsullied, Wildlings; all of them either carrying supplies, or making weapons, or helping the last of those not fighting into wagons that were waiting to take them south.

It had been decided that Missandei and Lord Varys would finally depart for White Harbor the day after tomorrow, and with the help of Lord Manderly’s granddaughter, who presided over White Harbor in his stead, they would orchestrate the transport of refugees to Dragonstone.

It had been her own idea, yet now that it was set in stone Daenerys was finding it difficult to contemplate the next days and weeks without her friend.

Snow crunched under their feet as she walked up the road towards the high, looming walls of the keep, accompanied by Missandei. Ghost trailed behind them, now thankfully recovered well enough from his own injuries that he could walk again, and he had assigned himself as their escort. The direwolf followed her constantly these days. Jon had suggested, half-jokingly, that his rapid recovery was likely due to sheer stubbornness on both of their parts: Daenerys refused to stay in one place, and Ghost refused to let her out of his sight.

They proceeded mostly in companionable silence, until a chanced look to her left made Daenerys stop. Out of the corner of her eye she spotted an old woman down a side street sitting still and alone. She alerted Missandei to her change in direction, and they turned away from the main road with Ghost loping lazily along.

The old woman did not look up as they approached. She had long thin hair, much longer than Daenerys’ own, and it was so stark white as to be almost translucent. Her shoulders were bowed as if she carried the weight of a thousand lifetimes. The clothes she wore were tattered and nondescript and did not look entirely warm enough for the weather.

“Excuse me,” Daenerys said softly. The old woman looked at her with surprisingly sharp eyes and a piercing gaze that seemed to stare straight into the depths of her soul, and yet she was also frail, and seemed even more so the closer Daenerys got to her. She should have been on the first wagon out of this place. “Is there someone we can find for you? Family, perhaps?”

“Your Grace is very kind,” the woman said. “But it's been a long time since I have had family alive in this world.” Her voice was accented and strange. Perhaps she was one of the Wildlings that Jon had saved.

Daenerys reached out to place a hand on her shoulder. She understood the loneliness she must be feeling. “Let me help you,” she said kindly. “There are still wagons going south. We can get you to-”
“I am too old to be traveling,” the woman insisted, interrupting her. “My place is here.”

This was not the first time Northern stubbornness had made people reluctant to leave, and Daenerys was quickly losing patience for it. “If you stay here, you’ll die,” Daenerys said bluntly, sitting down next to her.

“Everyone dies, Daenerys Stormborn,” the woman said. “Here or there, now or later. What’s the difference? I am old, and I have done all I can in this life.” It was not said with sadness, nor with despair, but with a brutal matter-of-fact tone that, in a way, seemed more distressing.

“Your life is not over,” Daenerys insisted. “You do not have to resign yourself to this.”

The old woman regarded her for a long moment. “You are young still,” she said finally. “I understand. But you cannot save everyone.”

“I can try.”

“What if I do not want to be saved?”

That stopped her mounting protest in its tracks. “What do you mean?” Daenerys asked quietly.

“It is my choice to remain,” she explained. “Just as it was your choice to come here to help us.”

“You would choose to die?”

The piercing gaze was leveled at her unabashedly. The woman’s eyes were a clear, deep blue. “Are you not also making that same choice?”

“I accept death as a possible consequence,” Daenerys replied. “But I do not choose it. That is the difference.”

There was a long moment of silence between them all, and the woman looked over at Ghost, who had seated himself at Daenerys’ side. If she found it strange, she did not remark upon it. “I suppose all we can do is pray for the gods to save us,” the woman said finally.

Daenerys sighed, and leaned back against the wall. “I don’t believe in any gods,” she admitted. “Does that make me terrible?”

“The gods don’t need you believe in them to work their will, Daenerys Stormborn, and even those who do not follow them can still serve their purpose.”

There was something familiar about this conversation, Daenerys thought, but she couldn’t quite put her finger on it. Missandei frowned a bit as well.

“You sound very sure,” Daenerys replied, more curious than skeptical.

“I have lived a long life,” she said. “Longer than most. Faith is all I have.”

“Well, I hope the gods can hear you,” she replied honestly, standing up again. “Wait here,” she asked her, and then strode back to the main road.

“What are you doing?” Missandei asked as they walked away.

“I’m going to find someone to help me get her to a wagon,” Daenerys insisted, not wanting to accept the old woman’s resignation of her fate. Death would not win so easily, not when she could prevent it.
In her mind, Jon again was murdered. She steeled her heart against it. That would not happen either.

She called to some bannermen on the road to help her, but when they approached and she turned to lead them back, the woman was gone. In fact, there was no sign that she had even existed at all. Had Missandei not been with her and confirmed that indeed an old woman had, in fact, spoken to them, Daenerys would have started to think she’d dreamt the entire interaction.

They searched up and down the narrow street, inside abandoned houses and through neighboring alleyways, but there was no sign of her. She sighed in frustration and sank against the stone wall of an empty house, defeated.

That afternoon found her atop the western wall, consumed by her thoughts. She leaned forward against the crenellations and watched Drogon flying in the distance. It was a clear day, and she could see quite a fair ways towards the horizon, the dark swath of the Wolfswood breaking up the endless snow.

Beside her sat Ghost, a silent sentry. She ran her fingers across the top of his head in appreciation.

The wind was chilling, but it kept her hair out of her face. She brought her cloak tight about her neck and continued watching the skies. The smaller shape of Rhaegal appeared, gliding low over the trees in long, lazy sweeps of his wings.

She thought of Viserion, and the familiar pang of grief worried its way into her heart. Would she ever get used to the sight of only two?

“Your Grace.”

She turned at the sound of Ser Jorah’s voice to see him approaching on her left. “I trust the Dothraki are in good order,” she replied. Daenerys has sent him to the camp to speak with Qhono, as her ability to ride was still hampered by the injury to her side. It was getting better, but the process was slow and she didn’t want to push things too fast and set her progress back. She needed to be well enough to ride Drogon when the time came.

“They are,” he replied, standing beside her. “Though they complain about the snow.”

Daenerys felt a wry smile tilt the corner of her mouth, and turned to look back towards her dragons. “Yes, I suppose there’s not much winter weather in the Dothraki Sea.”

“Qhono did mention that some of them are falling ill,” Jorah continued. “From what he describes it sounds like winter sickness.”

She frowned. “How many?”

“A dozen or so. I told him to quarantine them and to let me know if it spreads.”

“Keep me informed,” she said. “Does anyone else know about this?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Good,” she said, sighing. “The last thing we need is the panic that would cause.” She made a note to herself to speak to Jon about it later, in the quiet privacy of his room.
Jorah stood by her as silence lingered between them. A faint echo of Drogon’s roar carried to them over the wind, and the older knight turned to watch the dark shapes of her children in the sky.

“In all your talk of Westeros, you never mentioned to me how beautiful the North was,” Daenerys said after a while. “Why is that?”

Jorah let out a contemplative breath. “I never really thought of it as such,” he replied quietly. “But yes, I suppose it is beautiful. In a way.”

She could feel his eyes on her, but she kept her gaze forward to the horizon. “Are you glad to be home?” she asked him. She knew his complicated history with the North and the events that led to his exile in Essos. He had spoken of it to her on some occasions, very vaguely and very, very briefly. She didn’t know what to think about the whole of it; the things he had done didn’t sound like the man she knew.

Yet he had betrayed her once too, she reminded herself. She let out a slow breath, watching it fog in the air before her and then dissipate with the wind.

Though she had lived it, even that event was a far removal from the Jorah Mormont that stood beside her now.

“For a long time, all I wanted was to be able to return home,” Jorah answered her after a long while. “I longed for it. To see my family again. To see my father again, and apologize for the wrongs I had done.” He sighed. “But it’s been a long time. My father is gone, and this doesn’t feel like home any longer. I have no joyful memories of this place.”

“You have your cousin,” Daenerys pointed out gently.

“A child, and more suited to lead House Mormont than I ever was.”

“She is very capable,” Daenerys agreed.

“She reminds me of her mother,” he said quietly. “And my father.”

“Jon speaks highly of your father as well,” she said. “I would have liked to have met him.”

Rhaegal swooped by, a tad closer to Winterfell than Daenerys would have liked. She wanted Drogon to keep his distance so as not to frighten the people here, and each day she had been allowing him closer and closer. She caught people standing atop the walls sometimes, looking for them now, the initial fear breaking down in favor of curiosity, especially in light of the recent story involving Rhaegal saving the King in the North.

While Drogon was surprisingly keen to obey her request for distance, Rhaegal’s newfound bond had the dragon eager to be close by.

“Do you remember when I lost my son?” she asked quietly, not sure why she felt so compelled to bring it up. “Rhaego?”

Jorah was silent. “I’m not like to forget it as long as I live,” he replied after a moment.

“I have been dwelling on it of late,” she murmured. She didn’t need to look at him to know the sympathy that shone in his face. “And on the witch that caused it.”

“That woman does not deserve a single moment of your thoughts,” he said, rather vehemently. “Not one.”
“That is easier said than done.”

“She was a vile woman who preyed upon you for her own vengeance,” Jorah said. “She is not deserving of the power you give her.”

“The power I give her?” she repeated incredulously.

He turned to look at her, serious and stern. Jorah had never regarded her in such a way before. “Every decision you make, every moment’s consideration of her that you allow is just another extension of her revenge.” He sighed, a bit frustrated. “I’m sorry if that’s too bold of me to say but I must speak my mind on this.”

It struck a chord with in her, clear and true. His words rang through her mind as if she had been shrouded all this time, and now could finally see.

“You don’t think her curse is true then?” she asked, though her voice wavered a bit as she spoke.

“No, I do not,” he said.

“After all that you’ve seen, all that we’ve been through together, and you are skeptical of magic?”

“Magic? No. What she did was not magic,” he insisted. “I’ve seen you walk through fire twice and come out unscathed. You woke dragons from eggs the world had long thought turned to stone. I believe a vengeful witch cannot do anything to you that you do not allow.”

Her heart was beating hard in her chest. She had brought up the loss of her son in hopes that Jorah’s recollection would be the reassurance that she needed that she was doing the right thing in pushing Jon away. Surely he would be the one person who would believe her?

Yet she was surprised by the complete opposite. Instead of reassurance, she found doubt. And where there was doubt, hope soon followed.

She let out a shaking breath. “Ser Jorah, I am grateful for your wise counsel,” she said.

“No, I do not,” he said.

And where there was doubt, hope soon followed.

She let out a shaking breath. “Ser Jorah, I am grateful for your wise counsel,” she said.

“Of course, your Grace,” he said, clearly relieved that she was not angry with him. Then his brow furrowed. “Though I confess I’m not sure what it is I’m counseling.”

Daenerys regarded him for a moment, and then reached out to take one of his hands in hers. Tyrion had remarked before that Jorah loved her, and she had seen it herself, clear as day across his face. He’d made no attempts to hide it. At the time she’d not known quite what to do with the affections, as she did not return them, but she also did not want to outwardly say so in case that meant that he would leave her. Yet three times she’d sent him away, and three times he’d returned. She hadn’t seen that same love in his face recently; it had faded and been replaced with something else. Loyalty? Belief? It was hard to determine, and she had not asked.

“You’ve prevented me from going through with a horrible mistake,” she said to him. “Will you come with me while I remedy it?”

He held her gaze, and nodded. “Of course,” he said quietly. She could see some sort of understanding in his face, and wondered how much of the matter he had guessed. “I believe Jon Snow is in the courtyard,” he said after a moment, and pulled his hand from hers. There was no sadness there, or defeat, but merely a mild encouragement that surprised her. “His sister Arya has instigated a contest. It’s become quite an affair.”
Daenerys raised an eyebrow. “A contest?” she said. “You are not participating?”

“It’s marksmanship,” he replied. “Not really my area of expertise.”

The two of them proceeded back down the wall, Ghost ambling on ahead of them. The courtyard was quite crowded when they approached, coming out under the breezeway from the north side of the keep, and the air was filled with a lightness that hadn’t been present in the castle since she’d arrived. She heard the twang of a bow and the thud of an arrow sinking into a target. Several people applauded, others groaned, and there was a great shuffling about as some money exchanged hands.

Daenerys began to nudge forward into the crowd, immensely curious, and Jorah followed. They reached the center of the group in time to see Jon preparing to take his second shot; an initial arrow already buried solidly in the center of his mark.

Ser Davos was there as well, and Lord Umber too, and on the other side of them she could see Sansa and her guard Podrick, and Arya as well, the dark haired sister watching her brother with the shrewd eyes of competition.

“Come to observe, your Grace?” Davos asked as she and Jorah came to stand beside them.

“I came looking for Jon,” she admitted, the excited mood starting to lighten her heart a bit too. “But I see he is otherwise occupied.”

“His turn is almost done,” Ned said to her, eyes sparkling with delight.

Another twang and thud, and a second arrow landed next to the first.

“Are you not in this contest, my Lord?” she asked the boy.

Lord Umber made a wry face. “I lost in the first round,” he said.

“And what round is this?”

“Seventh, your Grace.”

Jon turned away from the target to grab a third arrow, and he caught sight of her. He paused for only a moment as their eyes met, but it was enough for others to notice her presence. She wondered perhaps if this was a good idea; she didn’t want to disrupt the competition. However, Jon flashed an uncharacteristic grin in her direction and it soothed all of her worries.

His third arrow met the target in much the same way as the first two; so much so that she couldn’t tell one arrow from the other at the distance. Applause echoed around the crowd and it was briefly acknowledged before Jon handed the bow off to the next competitor.

“I don’t mean to be a distraction,” she said as he walked over to stand beside her.

“We could use another witness to Arya’s defeat,” Jon said goodnaturedly, and just loud enough for his sister to hear. Arya rolled her eyes in response.

Daenerys observed them both with amusement. “You are very good,” she said, nodding to the target.

His gaze lingered on her a bit. “I suppose I’m a fair hand at it,” he replied modestly, then he lowered his voice so only she could hear. “To be quite honest, Arya is likely to beat me at this.” Pride in his sister shone through in his tone, and it warmed her heart. “But I’m not about to make it easy on her. Nor is Lord Cerwyn.” He gestured to the man preparing to take his turn.
She smiled at him. “Of course not.” Daenerys took several measured breaths to keep herself steady. Her heart was beating so hard she thought it might bruise her. “Will this contest continue for much longer?” she asked him after they watched Lord Cerwyn in his first attempt, applauding dutifully.

He regarded her with a raised eyebrow. “It’s the last round,” he said, shrugging. “Do you need me for something?”

Daenerys took a breath. “I thought perhaps we could marry this afternoon,” she replied, taking great care to make sure her words were clear and measured. “Unless you have other things that you need to attend to.”

Jon had been watching Lord Cerwyn, and it took a moment for what she had said to really sink in. He turned to look at her with a mix of astonishment and confusion.

“I am, of course, being entirely serious,” she continued when he seemed a bit speechless.

He looked at her with an expression that she thought would break her heart. It was surprised, disbelieving, hopeful. Those standing nearest had overheard the conversation and it had created an air of anticipation about them as she waited for Jon to say something. Certainly, he was surprised and caught completely off guard. It probably would have been better to speak to him privately, but the words had come tumbling out before she could stop them. It couldn’t wait. She had already wasted too much time.

“Well, lad, are you going to give her an answer?” Ser Davos prodded with an amused expression.

Jon blinked and seemed to get a handle on himself. “Aye,” he said to her finally, and then he grabbed her face and kissed her.

Though she knew their affection for one another was not a secret, she wondered if perhaps this was the first time it had been so clearly displayed in front of others.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered as they broke apart. He still held her close. “We should have done this weeks ago.”

“You’ll find no argument from me,” he replied. “What changed your mind?”

Daenerys looked up at him. “Hope,” she said simply. “If there is even the slightest chance that the curse isn’t real,” she whispered. “I want that chance to be with you.”

As far as wedding traditions went, Daenerys found the Northern way to be quite to her liking. A simple question, Do you take this man?, asked, answered, and sealed with a kiss. No drawn out speeches, no incomprehensible ceremonies. Easy. Straightforward. Perfect.

All in all, it took less time to perform than it did for Jorah to locate Tyrion and the rest of her counsel, as she requested they be present. She felt calm and at ease for the first time in weeks.

Afterwards, she and Jon sat together at the high table in the Great Hall and watched as the room was filled with celebration. It seemed, for all the seriousness of the Northern people, and all the thoughts they may have of her personally, they did know how to enjoy themselves when the occasion called for it.
Daenerys turned to her husband at her side, his eyes alight as he listened to his sisters argue over wildly differing recollections of a childhood incident. His hand rested gently on her leg beneath the table; a casual, intimate gesture that she cherished. Slowly, she reached her hand forward to cover his, entwining their fingers together.

He looked down at their hands first, then up to meet her eyes. Laughter rang around them.

She leaned forward to murmur in his ear. “Are you happy?” she asked.

Jon brought the hand held up to his lips to brush a kiss across the skin of her fingers. “Immeasurably,” he replied.

Chapter End Notes

surprise wedding! well, probably not. you all knew it was headed this way lol.

there might be a slight extra delay posting the next part due to 1) thanksgiving being at my house this year because apparently I hate myself and 2) I want to have the next three chapters done completely before I start posting them so that there is minimal wait time in between. you'll thank me later.

see you in the comments. if anyone has any tips for a first time thanksgiving host, I'm listening. omgpleasehelpme
Winterfell I

Chapter Summary

The dead come to Winterfell, part one.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

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Winterfell I

Arya

“It’s your move.”

Arya blinked. She was cross-legged on the bed her parents once shared, a game board and its varied pieces spread across the furs. Across from her, Sansa was in a similar position and looking at her with a raised eyebrow.

“I’m thinking,” she said absentmindedly.

“You don’t have a lot of options,” Sansa replied. “You could have considered all of them twice over by now.”

Arya rolled her eyes. “I’m taking my time at it.”

“We’ll both have grey hair by the time you’ve finished taking your time at it.”

She let out a breath and moved the piece that would extend the game a bit longer. Sansa had handily beaten her two turns ago, and unless her sister made a mistake in the next round - unlikely - all she was doing was prolonging her own demise.

This game had become a tradition for them in the past weeks. It started simply enough; as she had given up her room to Daenerys, she had stayed in Sansa’s room in the interim and they would play the game before bed. Sometimes they would talk, sometimes they wouldn’t, but for both of them it was a good way to take time for themselves, as sisters.

As she expected, Sansa was quick to move her piece. “This was too easy,” she said. “We’re going to have to play a second game after this.”

Her tone was lighthearted, but Arya could hear the sadness there. Jon had told Sansa to leave tomorrow, to take Bran to White Harbor and catch the next ship out to Dragonstone. Her sister had managed to delay leaving as long as possible under the guise of needing to be around to help, and them also needing Bran’s ability to see what he shouldn’t, but it was getting too late. The dead were within days of them now, and the weather was getting worse. Soon it would be hardly possible to
travel even with hardy Northern horses.

There was an ache in her heart, and she rubbed the side of a wooden game piece with her thumb for a long moment before placing it and declaring Sansa the winner.

“Play again?” her sister asked.

“Of course. I’m the stone pieces this time.”

She started gathering up the pieces to reset the game, and Sansa flipped the board around to center the correct sides between them.

“Jon and I played this a few times,” she said, holding her hands out for the wooden pieces. “Before he left for Dragonstone. He always beat me at it, and so I made Podrick play against me all the time while he was gone so that I could practice.”

Arya started setting up her side of the board. “Did it help?”

Sansa was quiet for a long moment. “I don’t know,” she said quietly. “We haven’t had a chance to play since he returned.”

“I suppose he has been rather occupied,” Arya acknowledged. She made her first move after a brief deliberation. “Last Hearth, then preparing the keep, then going out and helping Last Hearth again.” She tallied the list off on her fingers.

“And getting married,” Sansa added.

“Yes, that as well.”

Jon had married Daenerys a fortnight ago, and the concept of it all was still a strange thing for Arya to grasp. Her moody older brother, married to a queen, because he loved her. A part of her wished she could travel back through time just so she could tell those that had looked down on him all the great things that Jon had done. Don’t you see that it doesn’t matter? she would scream, but then she remembered that Sansa would have been one of those people she would be screaming at, and looked up at her sister as she considered her next play. What a change it had been, for her to go from barely acknowledging that Jon existed at all to being so dear to him that he had asked her to say the words in the Godswood at his wedding.

The rest of the game continued mostly in silence. Arya couldn’t think of anything to say. It was well into the night by the time the second game was finished; a more intense competition than the previous round, and she stared at the completed board for a long moment. Was this the end? Was this to be the last game they played together? She looked up at her sister, and tried to swallow the lump in her throat.

“Play again?” she asked.

Sansa smiled, and started to reset the board.

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Sansa

She stood in the courtyard of as snow fell around her. Dragonglass was everywhere, sharp and
glittering menacingly in the snow. The sky above was a dreary, angry gray. People walked by, but no one really spoke. A subdued, anxious quiet blanketed everything. It didn’t look or feel like her home.

“You’re finally leaving then?”

Turning around, she was intrigued to see the Hound approaching. Of all the people that had joined her brother’s fight, his appearance had been most surprising. Firstly, because she had thought him dead, and secondly, serving another king was the last thing she’d expected him to do since abandoning the Kingsguard. They’d had a couple of short conversations to that affect since he’d arrived in Winterfell, and he had been aggressively clear that he didn’t serve anyone.

“Jon is sending me to Dragonstone,” she replied, hands clasped together in front of her. “I never learned to fight, and so I am of no use to him here any longer.”

Sandor stared at her for a long moment, in his usual unapologetic way. “Good.”

“Good that I’m leaving?” she asked. “Or good in that I never learned to fight?”

“Both.”

More silence stretched between them, and she searched for something to say. “Do you remember that night in King’s Landing?” she asked finally, looking up at him. He didn’t seem as tall and intimidating now as she remembered. “When you offered to take me home?”

He looked levelly at her. “I do.”

“I’ve often thought about it myself,” she said. “Over and over since then, wondering if I should have said yes to you. How my life would have been different. If perhaps I wouldn’t have suffered all the things that I did.”

There was a long pause before he responded. “No use dwelling on things that can’t be changed.”

She sighed. “I realize that, but I wanted to acknowledge it all the same. You offered to protect me when you didn’t have to. You kept Arya safe on the road, regardless of your intentions, and you didn’t have to.” She stepped forward. “You are here, fighting with my brother, and you don’t have to be.”

His jaw was set and his posture stiff, clearly uncomfortable with the words, yet he remained and let her continue.

“It appears hounds and wolves are not so dissimilar,” she went on. “And we look after our own.” Sansa let a pause linger between them as she decided on what she wanted to say. “I know you’re not beholden to me in any way,” she continued. “And it’s more likely that I am the one that owes you a favor after what you have already done for my family. But I would ask one thing of you before I leave.”

“Go on then,” he said.

She took a deep breath, and then looked him square in the eye. “Please protect my brother and sister,” she asked quietly. “Please.”

He looked at her for a long moment, and then slowly nodded the barest gesture of understanding. Deep down, she knew that it was just words. Jon would run head first into whatever danger he saw and Arya would follow. Perhaps, though, if they had Sandor running with them…
Sansa took a deep breath to keep her emotions in check. “Thank you,” she murmured, and added, “I hope we will see each other again.”

Sandor held her gaze for a brief, deliberative moment. “So do I,” he replied, and with one last glance at her, he walked away.

Brienne and Podrick approached as he left, and her lady protector stared off after Sandor’s retreating form with a furrowed brow. “Are you ready to leave, my Lady?” Brienne asked.

“Yes,” she said. “I’m waiting for Jon. He’s gone to get Bran.”

There was a glance to the wagon behind her. There were some supplies inside, a trunk of her things and Bran’s things, and buried inside the folds of her clothes there she had hidden away some heirlooms of their House: an embroidered Stark banner; an old knife she knew had belonged to their father, the direwolf sigil on the handle; a pin she had found in a drawer that she knew her mother had worn.

A well used game set, pieces worn smooth from use.

“I am sending Podrick with you,” Brienne said.

“What?” Sansa looked up at her sharply, surprised. “You are staying?” She had assumed Brienne would follow her.

“I must,” Brienne replied, maddeningly neutral about it. “I swore to protect both you and your sister, and I think I will be more of use here if Arya stays. Podrick is more than capable of protecting you and your brother on your journey.”

Sansa didn’t quite know what to say to this, and took a deep breath to steady her emotions. “Very well, then,” she said finally, knowing it was useless to argue, and too tired to even make the attempt. “Know that I expect many more years of service from you, Brienne.”

Please don’t die.

Her protector returned her look with an emotional nod. “As you say, my Lady,” she replied.

Snow began to fall.

Jon and Arya appeared, the former pushing their brother’s wheeled chair, and the latter carrying the last of his things. Brienne and Podrick stepped aside as they approached to give them space.

She didn’t want to say goodbye.

Arya tossed the linen sack into the back of the wagon without a word, then pulled herself up into the back of it with a nimble jump. Together, she and Jon lifted up their brother and his chair with him and into the wagon. No one moved to help them, and they did not ask for it.

His chair was tied to iron rings to keep him secure on the journey, and once they had done so, Arya threw her arms around him. Bran returned her embrace, though he did not speak, and it was a long moment before she released him and jumped down from the back of the wagon.

Jon pulled one of the furs into his hands and draped it about Bran to keep him warm, his expression set and determined and focused solely on the action. It reminded her of when they were children and their father would tuck their furs about them at night. When he was finished, he too embraced their brother.
Before Jon released him, Bran murmured something to him that no one else could hear, and Sansa watched Jon’s face, emotional and clearly affected. After a moment, Jon too stepped down from the wagon.

Arya hugged her first, tightly and earnestly in the way that was uniquely Arya. Sansa returned it tightly, and wished that she had taken more opportunity to do so. Her eyes began to sting with tears, and she was unable to prevent it.

“This isn’t goodbye forever,” Arya insisted, emotion in her voice as well. “I promise.”

“I know,” Sansa replied, trying to put confidence in her voice. “I expect to see you on Dragonstone before too long. We have a game to play.”

Jon approached them, and he wrapped his arms about her as well. In this, she allowed herself one moment of weakness. She clung to her brother tightly and silently begged for comfort and reassurance.

“I’m tired of saying goodbye,” she said as he pulled away.

“So am I.” He looked tired. She could see it in his eyes and the way he held himself. “Be careful on the road,” he cautioned, and pulled a dragonglass dagger from his belt. “And remember what we taught you.”

Sansa felt the smooth black stone in her hands, and remembered the meager lessons Jon and Arya had given her. “Yes,” she confirmed, holding the dagger tightly. “Sharp end towards enemy.”

The corners of his mouth turned up a bit. “Good,” he said, letting out a breath. “Now go on.” He nodded his head towards the front seat of the wagon, where one of the two bannermen that were to accompany them was already seated, reins in hand. Her mouth felt dry and her heart was heavy in her chest. She didn’t want to get on the wagon. She didn’t want to leave.

Stepping up to the seat was hard, but she did it. She pulled her cloak about her as Podrick mounted his horse to ride beside her. Turning back for one more moment, she tried to memorize how Jon and Arya looked. Robb and Rickon and their father had already faded in her memory. She didn’t spend enough time trying to know them. She wasn’t going to make that mistake again.

Jon looked back at her, as if he were trying to do the same as she.

“Let’s go, then,” she murmured to the bannerman at her side, not bothering to keep the edge of emotion from her voice. As they crossed under the gate, she looked back once more. Jon and Arya stood together, apart from the others. Behind them, Brienne nodded farewell to Podrick. And above, standing on the breezeway, Daenerys stood with Tyrion.

Her former husband acknowledged her departure with a slow wave of his hand. She returned it slowly before turning back to her family.

She watched them until the gate was shut behind her.

A single tear ran down her face.
Daenerys

A knock on the door in the early hours of the morning pulled her from a deep sleep. It was soft, but insistent, and the muffled voice of Ser Davos called to Jon through the door.

Her husband untangled himself from her reluctantly to pull on a shirt and trousers. From the bed she watched him pad silently across the room.

He cracked the door slightly to address his advisor. “How long?” she heard Jon ask after a moment’s pause.

“The scout estimates they’ll be here by sundown,” she heard Ser Davos reply. “He’s the only one that’s returned.”

Daenerys sat up in the bed, dread and worry in her chest. They’d prepared and waited and planned for this day. They’d known it was coming, yet the reality of it was hard on her. She tried to keep the fear from shaking her apart.

“Wake the others,” Jon murmured in reply. “We’ll meet in the Hall.”

“Aye, your Grace.”

She could see his own worry and fear as he closed the door again, turning to lean upon it.

Wordlessly, she reached for him, beckoning him back to the bed, and he obeyed. She tried to memorize the taste and feel and smell of him, the sound of her name on his lips. His warmth. His strength.

She wanted more of it.

This would not be the last time they lay together. She felt a tear escape the side of her eye and trace a warm path to her ear. She felt the hard muscles of his back beneath her hands, and the weight of him on top of her, and the graze of his teeth against the skin of her neck. In her mind, she watched him die over and over again, and she held him to her as tight as she could.

Getting dressed after was a somber affair, borne only by the shared sense of duty between them. She strapped his vambraces on his arms. He tightened the buckles on the cuirass that had been made for her; a curved, steel plate covered in black leather. There were vambraces and greaves to match, and she found the weight and pressure of armor to be uncomfortable and foreboding. It didn’t bring her any comfort to wear it.

She watched as he belted Longclaw around his waist, a simple action that she had seen many times before, but she watched it intently all the same, memorizing his hands, his posture, the way his hair fell into his face. She knew he had done the same as she’d combed through her hair, braiding it back simply for now. When she left to gather the khalasar, they would add more in the Dothraki style as they prepared for war.

The meeting in the Hall was quiet and subdued. Plans were repeated, strategies and contingencies gone over again for the thousandth time. Jon had prepared them all the best he could, and there was nothing more to do now except to implement those plans.

Drogon roared in anticipation, and no one flinched at him any more. She felt his anger and restlessness like a fire within her.

Her fear was quickly being replaced with determination. She let her gaze wander over all who
gathered there. Lords of the North. Men, women, and children standing as strong and resolute against the coming storm as if they were made of stone themselves. Bronze Yohn Royce and his Knights of the Vale; still not warmed to her but loyal enough to the cause to remain on Sansa’s request. A handful of Unsullied, led by Grey Worm. A couple Dothraki Khal’s, familiar enough with the Common Tongue to understand, but they still looked to her for guidance and translation.

It was midday when she made it to the courtyard, going through the routine of saddling a horse herself before she departed across the southern hills to the Dothraki. Tyrion had already gone; he was to remain at Castle Cerwyn with a small force of auxiliaries to assist with the aftermath - whatever the final outcome may be.

The straps of the leather saddle were soft in her hand, and the smell of horse was strong in her nose. She kept her focus on her task and didn’t want to think of leaving. When she departed the gate, would she set foot in Winterfell again?

The Northern mare was calm and unbothered by the activity and tenseness around them, and Daenerys wished that she too could find that sense of peace.

“You’re causing quite a stir out here, saddling your own horse,” Jon said, walking up to stand beside her as she fastened the last buckle snugly in place.

“I need to keep myself occupied or my thoughts will drive me mad,” she admitted, her voice a quiet murmur. She had been dreading this, the farewell, and judging by the pain in his eyes so had he.

“This isn’t goodbye,” he said quietly, insistent. “Don’t even say it.”

She didn’t intend to, and instead she folded herself into his embrace. The metal of his gorget was cold against her cheek but she could hardly feel it. He held her tight in return, one hand caressing the hair on the back of her head.

After a long moment, she painstakingly wrenched herself away, breaking the silence. “I have something for you,” she said, and dug her fingers into the pocket of her own belt, feeling for a long metal chain. He looked at her curiously as she pulled it out, the metal cool in her hands, and holding it up for him to see. Dangling at the bottom, a ring with two white stones glittered in the sunlight. “This ring belonged to my mother,” she said softly.

Jon knew that. He knew also that she never took it off, that she treasured it the most of all her possessions.

She stepped forward and splayed the chain out between her fingers. “I want you to keep it with you,” she said seriously, meeting his eyes. She tried to fix that shade of stormy grey in her memory. “And after the battle is won you will return it to me, do you understand?”

She opened her hands and raised them up, and after a moment he dipped his head so she could place the chain about his neck. Her hands slid down his chest, and he reached up to take them in his. A chaste kiss was placed upon her fingers. Her ring shone against the dark leather of his gambeson, resting on the center of his chest just beside his heart.

“You’ve caught me at a disadvantage, as I have nothing to give you,” Jon said quietly.

“You’ve already given me everything I ever dreamed for myself,” she whispered, placing a hand over his heart. “All I want is more time.”

He kissed her, and she held her tears at bay.
“We will see each other again,” he said. A command. A promise. He kissed her once more, and then stepped back, releasing her. “Now go,” he said to her, holding the reins of her horse steady so she could mount it. “While I have the strength to bear it.”

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Tyrion

The wind whipped at him as he stood atop a hill and faced Winterfell from the south. Ahead he could see a gathering storm. Dark clouds churned in the northern sky. The sun was beginning to set, casting orange-reddish hues across the snow.

Daenerys stood at his side. She looked almost exactly how he thought a warrior queen would look. The very incarnation of Visenya Targaryen, he thought, though perhaps with a bit more Northern flair than any Targaryen had ever worn. At her side, Ghost stood so still and focused on the northern horizon that he seemed to be almost carved from stone. Her grey and white cloak flew behind her in the wind, and her silver hair blended into it seamlessly. The straps, already battle-damaged; criss-crossed over a steel cuirass covered in shining black leather.

She was beautiful.

Her eyes were hard and focused as she stared at the round towers of Winterfell before them. There was no fear there, only a great and terrible determination. This was not the young queen he’d met in Essos. This was not the fiery woman who’d occupied Dragonstone.

This was someone else entirely.

“Tell me we’ll see each other again,” he said to her.

Daenerys looked down at him, her face morphing from hardened steel to compassion. “Of course we will,” she said with a confidence he did not feel. As if to emphasize her point, Drogon thundered at her side. His steps shook the ground, and Tyrion could feel the heat from him. His wings stretched over their heads and he resisted the instinct to cower.

Behind them, the Dothraki had the opposite reaction. They were heartened and bolstered by Drogon’s presence and their Khaleesi beside them. Daenerys turned to shout something to them, and Tyrion wished he’d paid more attention to the Dothraki language. He only picked up a few words as she spoke; not enough to understand. He wished that he could. Perhaps what she was saying would embolden him with the same confidence of victory.

Then again, he’s always been a pessimist. Might as well be a pessimist to the end.

The wind was colder than ever, whipping at his hair and his clothes, and it got increasingly colder as the sun began to descend lower into the sky.

Daenerys stopped speaking abruptly, and whipped her head around to Drogon, hearing something the rest of them did not. The dragon was unnaturally still, eyes fixed on the Northern horizon.

“He’s watching for Viserion,” she said, her voice flat and devoid of any emotion. Her eyes were hard and determined as she turned one last time to look at him, and the vision of her was burned into his mind. Here was the Daenerys Targaryen the fighter, the conqueror.
The queen.

This was why Jorah Mormont always spoke of her with such reverence. Tyrion had written it off as romantic love, and though that could have quite possibly been the case at one time, he knew that it was not an unrequited hope that kept the knight in her service. It was the feeling that he was standing in the presence of something greater. The people of Westeros had thought the Targaryens as gods when they came upon them, and it was easy to see why.

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Jon

He stood atop the north wall. It was a chilling, dreadful wait, and no one dared speak. Anyone that could shoot a bow with half decent accuracy was standing with him two rows deep. Most of them were young.

Too young.

Stacks of more dragonglass arrows stood spaced between them. Barrels of pitch and with torches to light them were there as well, waiting. Arya stood still and calm at his side, though he did note that she couldn’t help but fidget nervously with the buckle on her quiver.

Sam stood on his other side, resolute and steady.

“I just want to apologize in advance for my poor aim,” Sam said, half joking.

“Fire out that way, and you’re bound to hit something,” Jon replied, pointing out north.

There was a long moment of silence. “Feels like old times, doesn’t it?” Sam murmured to him after a while. “You and me, standing atop a wall. Freezing.”

“Aye,” he acknowledged with a wry smile. “Except the Wildlings are on our side now.”

The sun was perhaps an hour from setting, but it was already much darker than it should be. Heavy, ominous clouds swirled and churned in the sky, and the wind ripped mercilessly at them. In his mind, he could feel the warmth of Rhaegal there and tried to remember the little guidance Daenerys had been able to give him.

*Direct your thoughts to him like you would a person,* she’d said. *He’ll understand.*

He cautioned Rhaegal to stay high above and to the south.

At least, he hoped he did.

The memory of his wife’s departure still burned brightly in his mind. Black leather armor stood out in stark contrast to her silver hair, and he knew he would never forget the sight of her atop that horse, face set in grim determination, the wind tossing her hair behind her, the grey cloak he had given her tightly secured. She was beautiful, and strong, and he intended to fight through all the seven Hells to see her again.

Footsteps to his left announced the approach of Lord Cerwyn. “Ser Jaime reports the western wall is fully manned,” he said. “They await your orders.”
Jon let out a breath as he stared out into the moors and the coming darkness. “Aye,” he acknowledged. “When it comes, Arya will start it. Have them follow after. Go on and let Ser Jorah know as well.”

Wind tore at them hard, whipping cloaks about without mercy. A banner struggled on its pole only to be ripped away, the white direwolf floating behind them and falling to the ground.

The sun began to set.

“They’re here,” Arya whispered, and Jon looked out before them. Mist had begun rolling forward, starting out faint but getting more and more clear as the dead approached. He then turned and locked eyes with his sister, who had a tight grip on her bow. Her face was set, and she returned his look with one of brave certainty. He worried for her, and not for the first time he wished she had gone to White Harbor with Sansa and Bran.

Yet he had seen her fight and knew she could hold her own. In a way, he was glad of her beside him.

His throat was dry and his muscles were tense as he turned back to the approaching enemy.

Beneath his armor, the weight of a ring pressed against his chest.

_Night gathers, and now my watch begins._

Chapter End Notes

so this is the first of three multi-POV chapters regarding the battle at Winterfell and all involved, and then after I will be switching back to one POV per chapter again.

let me know what you think. I hope you guys enjoy them.
Winterfell II

Chapter Summary

The dead come to Winterfell, part two

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Winterfell II

Arya

The fog was just as it had been in the forest by the Long Lake. Slow rolling. Eerie. It was as if it was pushed by an invisible wind. To her right, Ned Umber squared his shoulders. His face showed nothing but anger. On her left, Jon stared out before them. He showed no emotion; merely a dispassionate sort of expression, as if this was just another minor problem on a long list of things that needed his attention.

The dead walked forward, steady and unceasing. She readied her bow.

“Hold,” Jon said, his voice carrying across the silent wall. Then he turned to her. “Are you ready?” he asked. She looked out over the snowy moor to the small marker and nodded. She’d been practicing for weeks.

She waited for Jon as she watched the dead come closer.

“Nock,” he said, voice quiet but commanding.

She placed the arrow to her bowstring.

“Draw.”

Drawing her bow seemed to center her somehow. The rushing wave of panic she felt as the dead moved closer began to fade away to nothing. All that was there was the target in front of her. She pulled the arrow fletching back to her cheek. The fire was hot against her fingers.

“Loose.”

The arrow shot across the field and found its mark just as the dead approached it. A heartbeat later, flames burst forth and spread out in a line along the trench like lightning. Answering shots from the east and west extended the line of fire.

A small cheer echoed around them as the screams of the dead floated upwards. Jon didn’t react to the minor success and only made to grab his own bow.

*It won’t hold them for long,* he’d said.
“Archers ready!” he called out, loud enough for his voice to carry along the wall. Faintly, she heard the voice of Jaime Lannister echo the command.

“Nock and hold!”

Arya pulled a dragonglass arrow from her quiver, and a thousand men and women mimicked her movement, the clink of dragonglass accompanying the motion like some sort of strange music. She watched the dead through the line of flames, already brighter in the gathering twilight. The eyes shone blue even from the distance.

“Draw!”

The creak of leather and wood and string all pulled back together in unison. Arya anchored her hand against her cheek once more, the fletching brushing her skin. She set her her sights on a target: a shadow with glowing eyes.

“Loose!”

The *twang* of a thousand arrows answered her brother’s command. She watched as her arrow joined the flood of the rest, and dead men crumpled into piles of bones.

Jon ordered them all to set again.

*Nock and hold. Draw. Loose.*

Three more volleys they sent into the wave of dead, but for each soldier they felled another would quickly appear in its place. The routine of it settled her nerves and gave her focus. *Nock and hold. Draw. Loose.*

Each dead man she picked went down, collapsing into bone and dust.

As the moon rose from the horizon their line of fire faded. More and more dead soldiers began to cross as the remains of their brethren piled on the flames before them like a macabre bridge.

All too soon, they started to reach the second marker. She looked at Jon questioningly, fiery arrow on her hand.

“Wait,” he said.

She watched as the dead came closer and held steady for her brother’s command. Jon dispatched two dead men and readied his bow for a third before she looked at him again.

“When ready,” he said to her.

She focused on the second marker, closer and clearer than the first. She pulled back as she took a breath, aimed, and let the arrow fly, bright and true.

This one hit its mark as well, but it didn’t light.

“Again,” was all Jon said. “Aim a little lower.”


She hit the base of it this time, a handspan beneath her first arrow. Still, it didn’t catch.

“Again. Hurry.”
Arya turned back to the marker again but dead men were passing it now, obstructing her path.

“Concentrate fire to keep the marker clear,” Jon ordered to the men around them, and several bows angled downwards to match hers. She put the arrow to the string and waited.

One breath, and then two.

The dead fell all around it and she seized the first opening she could. The arrow whizzed down to bury itself deep into the marker next to the others.

Still, it did not light.

“Damn it!” she swore in anger, but after a tense half a moment, the marker ignited the second line of fire.

Relief spread through her as she watched the line spread out in a blaze, cutting off hundreds of dead soldiers from the rest.

She reached behind her head for another arrow.

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Jaime

He watched the line of fire burn.

Trenches filled with pitch had been a good idea, but it would have been more effective if their opponents were living men. The dead swarmed up to the lines mindlessly, and each one that perished was stepped over by five more that took its place. They had no fear. They had no sense of self-preservation.

They just had sheer, overwhelming numbers.

His mouth felt dry as he watched them approach, slowed only by the volleys of arrows that sailed from the walls. Bodies piled up around the cross posts, and more dead began to clamber over them.

Brienne stood at his side, her face a careful mask, but he saw fear in her eyes.

“Is this your first siege?” he asked her.

“You know the answer to that,” she replied.

A shout down the end of the line of archers echoed back to him, and he looked down the wall to see that the dead had broken through both the fire and the cross posts down towards the western gate.

Weeks to build. Destroyed in hours.

Jaime hurried down the wall.

“Keep that breach as narrow as you can,” he ordered to the archers there. That would hold it for a while, but it was only a matter of time before another hole was made. He didn’t like how close it was to the gate either.

Jaime turned about swiftly and headed for the stairs, taking them two at a time. Unsullied stood in
formation at all the points of entry, a glittering, silent phalanx of spears and shields. They showed no sign of anxiety or fear at the shouts from above or the sounds of arrows flying.

He called out for their commander. “Grey Worm!” he shouted, looking around for him. They all looked the same. It was like searching for one particular grain of sand on a beach.

The Unsullied commander pulled himself out of line and approached.

“They’ve breached the cross posts near this gate,” he said to him, pointing through the wall in approximation. “You are going to be hit first.”

Grey Worm nodded in understanding, and snapped orders to his men. They responded in unison. The phalanx shifted tighter, and they waited.

“Jaime!”

He whipped his head around to see Brienne coming down the stairs.

“What is it?” Her urgency was not a good sign. “Is there a second breach?”

“There’s about to be,” she said breathlessly. “A giant is headed straight for us.”

Certainly not words he’d ever thought he’d hear in his lifetime. He turned to Grey Worm again. “Prepare yourselves,” he said, and then made to follow Brienne back up to the wall.

It seemed to him that ‘giant’ was a rather underwhelming term for the huge, lumbering creature that approached. Jon Snow had warned of the possibility. Jaime would have assumed it a joke had he not been told the story of the Bolton’s defeat at Winterfell. Clearly giants were not the smallfolk fantasy he’d hoped they were.

“Shoot it down!” he shouted out.

“Don’t you think we’ve tried?” returned a frustrated looking Lord Manderly, eyes alight with both disbelief and the fervor of battle. “The arrows do not pierce it.”

Jaime watched as a volley headed straight for the giant, only for the arrows to bounce off it and scatter into ineffectiveness.

Damn.

He didn’t know what to do. If it got closer they would lose a gate, but they had no way to bring it down. People were looking to him for direction and he had none.

The beat of wings boomed over them, and a gust of wind pushed past with great force. A roar, and then fire was unleashed along the line of the dead, incinerating hundreds at once. The giant disappeared in a fiery blaze, and the glint of green scales flashed by in the light of the fire as the dragon passed. The walls shook.

*Where has that been all this time?*
They were on the inner walls now, and he was exhausted. The dead threw themselves at them unceasingly. The cross posts were nearly completely destroyed. In a moment of desperation he had called for Rhaegal to clear the ground, but sent him away immediately after. The warmth of the fire had been a relief. It had forced back the lines of the dead considerably, but he would not be able to do that again without damaging the integrity of his own walls.

He was also wary of sending Rhaegal forth without the protection of Drogon, especially when the whereabouts of Viserion were still unknown. His heart pounded, and he focused on the green dragon as he climbed back into the sky.

“Jon!” Arya called for him, jerking him out of the connection and back down to earth. He turned sharply to look at his sister, her eyes wide, bow in hand, and pointing outward over the northern gate. He followed her direction and saw another giant coming through the fog.

He’s about to call Rhaegal back when he hears it: a shrieking roar that set his teeth on edge and sent a shiver down his spine. It had affected him at Last Hearth before, but now that his eyes had been opened to his connection with dragons Viserion was worse to hear by ten fold. The wrongness of it made him ill.

The roar was then answered by a louder, fiercer one. Jon watched as Viserion emerged from the fog, only to be met by the black strength of Drogon. The larger dragon bore Viserion down hard, carving a large path through the army of the dead.

Blue flame clashed with orange, lighting up the fog with a hazy glow. Dark shapes churned around them, and Jon watched in horror as Drogon was surrounded by the dead. They fought, shaking the ground below them with each thundering step. They were too close to Winterfell, despite Drogon’s effort to pull Viserion away.

“Get back!” he yelled to those around him, casting his eyes about for his sister. Arya was farther down, close to the main keep, and he desperately tried to wave her away. “Get back, away from—”

He’d barely managed to run clear himself before a shot of blue flame carved a deadly path through the wall between them and beyond. Men and women screamed and were silenced. The force of the fire sent Jon skidding forward. He fell to his hands and knees, scraping them hard on impact. The stones shuddered beneath him. His bow was lost and red-hot rock rained down upon him. The wall was crumbling.

Jon tried to scramble to his feet, but his footing was lost in the collapse of the wall and he fell hard onto the roof of the half-melted barracks below. It stunned him and knocked the breath from his lungs. He rolled down the sloping roof, scrambling for a foothold. His movements were too sluggish and his mind was on fire with the roar and chaos of the dragons. He continued to slide, faster and faster, until he managed to hook a hand onto a jutting stone to slow his descent.

Unfortunately, he could not hold there for long and he eventually lost his grip. Jon crashed into the ground hard, gasping for air, the shock of it rattling through him. For a moment all he could do was stare up at the sky and struggle to breathe.

He heard someone calling his name, but he couldn’t move.

*It shall not end until my death.*
The feeling slowly returned to his arms and legs. He moved them gingerly to make sure nothing was broken. His breath came in ragged, desperate pulls for air. They became easier as it went on, and Jon tried to rise, but it felt as if his entire body was sore.

The fire from Viserion had caused a large breach in the wall; a dark scar through the earth that flamed and smoked. The stone wall was blasted apart. The tower and part of the main keep had been destroyed and melted, cutting them off from the western side. He pulled himself to his hands and knees, coughing hard as he forced himself to try and breathe properly.

A pair of boots came into his line of vision, and Jon looked up to see The Hound offering him a hand up. He took it gratefully and stood, rather unsteadily, fixing his gaze on the breach.

“There’s a whole company of Unsullied behind me,” The Hound said, sword in one hand and a long blade of dragonglass in the other. Jon looked away to see them approaching, spears in hand.

“Nothing comes through this breach,” Jon tried to say, but his voice was hoarse and difficult to capture. The Hound repeated his words for him, louder and with profane emphasis.

“Can you fight?” he asked Jon, looking at him, expression clearly showing doubt.

“I’m fine,” Jon insisted, standing up a bit straighter and drawing Longclaw. He was still a bit unsteady from the fall, but he was getting better with each breath. “I’m fine.” He looked up at the remains of the wall and tried to find Arya, but he couldn’t see anything through the smoke.

She’s a fighter. She’s alright. She’ll be fine, he repeated to himself, over and over, waiting for the words to actually calm him. Blue eyes began to shine in the breach, and he and the Hound charged forward with the Unsullied.

Daenerys

Drogon bore down on Viserion, orange flame licking at his jaws. The shock of the impact threatened to unseat her and she gripped tightly to the spines of his back. Blue flame shot past as Viserion struggled against them. The heat of it burned her clothes. They crashed into the ground and carved a swath through the army of the dead. Winterfell stood tall and proud to her left. She urged Drogon to be quick and merciless to protect the keep, but her son was consumed by the rage of the fight and she was unsure whether or not he could hear her commands.

She couldn’t tell whether the Night King was on Viserion, though she thought it was more likely that he wasn’t. Still, she kept her eyes alert for the blue white armor and the long spears he’d used to claim one of her children for himself.

Each roar from Viserion made her sick, and each tooth and claw he buried into Drogon in his struggle to escape she felt as if they happened to her own body. Dragon scales flew in the air as they struggled.

She whipped her head around as a booming sound echoed from Winterfell; a blast from Viserion had hit the walls. Daenerys watched in horror as the stone crumbled inward, the screams of the people there tearing at her heart. That had been her task - keeping Viserion away from Winterfell - and she had failed.
The piercing shrieks of the dead surrounded her and she turned back to see wights surrounding Drogon. They were reaching and grabbing to get at her, trying to climb his tail and legs and wings in a mass of churning death.

“Fly, Drogon!” she cried out desperately. “Fly!”

Viserion managed to shoot away from them with a great booming of his wings, and Drogon followed. Up, up into the clouds, higher and higher they chased him, until ice clung to her hair and the furs of her cloak. The wind burned her skin with the cold.

In the distance, she saw Rhaegal. He pursued from the west with a sweeping curve and he burst from the clouds with a line of orange flame, yet Viserion was too fast for them both. He was quickly pulling out of their reach.

“Faster,” she urged Drogon desperately. He roared in anger, shooting flame through the clouds.

Rhaegal moved to block Viserion from turning back towards the keep. They dove down beneath the clouds again, just over the army of the dead. There were thousands and thousands of them, a dark mass in the snow that seemed to stretch forever. She screamed the word Dracarys! for what she thought to be the hundredth time, but the fire made no difference. There were too many.

She looked back to Winterfell; blue flame still smoldering in the hole in the wall.

From her vantage point in the skies, she could see that her Dothraki were holding the dead to the north and west sides of the keep as planned, but the lines were blurred with conflict.

She had Drogon bank right and pushed him as hard as she could towards Viserion, but Rhaegal was there first. The two smaller dragons fought bitterly, and she heard each cry from Rhaegal in the depths of her heart. She saw blood, dark and steaming, pour from his wing and his flank and shower the ground below.

It was a nightmare.

She brushed tears from her face.

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Sam

He’d ended up in the Great Hall by helping an injured Northman out of the way, only to realize that the gathering place for the wounded was starting to become a breeding ground for the dead. Somehow he found the voice inside himself to take charge before they were all killed.

Most of his time thus far was spent patching up serious wounds and monitoring closely those he was not sure would recover. A bonfire for the dead had begun outside, and as people came through he had them leave with the dead to add to the gruesome pyre.

News came in short bursts, and he tried not to think too much about it and only focused on the tasks at hand.

Arya Stark entered the hall shortly after the north wall had collapsed, Alys Karstark hanging limply at her side. The younger girl was bleeding heavy from the wound at her neck. Arya was murmuring

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words of support and reassurance as she half dragged, half carried the wounded Lady forward. He met her halfway down the aisle, and one look between them said that Arya already knew what he was about to tell her.

“I can’t do anything for her,” he said, trying to be gentle about it.

“I know,” Arya said, her voice raspy from the smoke, laying the girl down carefully. “But she saved my life. I couldn’t leave her to die out in the snow.”

They both looked down at her, and Arya clenched her fist in anger and frustration, and Sam placed a hand on her shoulder.

“Have you seen Jon?” she asked. He watched as she looked about the room for familiar faces.

Sam shook his head. “I haven’t,” he replied.

“I was worried he was caught in dragon fire,” she murmured. “After the wall collapsed I couldn’t see him. We’ve been trying to fight our way back.”

Sam didn’t reply. There was a moment of silence as they both looked down at Lady Karstark, but Alys only stared blankly up at the ceiling now, eyes flat and unseeing.

In death, her youth was obvious.

“I suppose I should take her to the bonfire,” Arya said after a moment. “I don’t really want to see someone I know with those...eyes.”

“I can help you.”

“It’s alright,” she said, casually, as if merely declining a favor. “She’s not that heavy.”

Arya pulled Lady Karstark up and pulled her back out through the door.

She did not return.

Jorah Mormont appeared some time later, looking as if half his face had been blown away, and ushering forward an equally bloodied Lyanna Mormont.

“Can you fix a broken arm?” Ser Jorah asked him, and Sam looked down to see the younger Mormont holding her arm at a strange angle.

“I can,” he said, and Jorah sat the girl down on the nearest bench, ignoring the anger in her eyes as he did so. “Hold her shoulder please.”

“I told you to leave me alone, I can fight still!” Lyanna hissed at her kinsman.

“Let him fix your arm first and I won’t stop you,” Jorah said. “Or you’ll lose it and not fight again.” He braced his hands against her shoulder and Sam pulled her vambrace off gingerly. It was a bad break, and he had nothing to splint it with. He glanced at the girl in sympathy, but she had no pain in her eyes. Only fire.

He pulled the arm back into place, and a reactionary grimace was the only evidence of discomfort the girl showed. Sam strapped the vambrace on as tightly as he could. It was a poor brace, but it would have to do. She was lucky it was lined with steel.
“Place your arm across your chest like so,” he said, mirroring what he wanted her to do. He grabbed a strip of linen and tied her arm securely to her. “This is just a temporary measure until I can find something for a proper splint,” he warned her, testing the knot to make sure the arm was immobile.

“How am I supposed to fight with one hand?” she demanded.

“My advice is not to,” Sam said simply, and then turned to Ser Jorah. “Have you lost it?” he asked, referring to the eye on his left side, unable to see clearly through the blood and the dim light of the hearth fire.

“I don’t think so,” the knight replied. “It all looks worse than it feels.”

Sam nodded. “Have you seen Jon?”

“He’s at the north gate,” Jorah said. “He’s the one that sent us here. Don’t reckon she would have come if she’d not been ordered to.”

He felt a sigh of relief. Jon was still alive then. That was good.

His father’s sword hung heavy on his hip, and he had an idea. “Do me a favor?” he asked the knight suddenly.

Jorah looked down at him. “Anything,” he said sincerely.

“Trade weapons with me,” he said, unbuckling it quickly. Jorah looked at him in confusion. “This is my family’s sword,” he explained. “Heartsbane. It’s Valyrian steel, and I think it will be more effective in your possession than in mine.” He knew he wasn’t a fighter. His place was here, helping the wounded. A sword in his hand would just hurt Jon more than help him. He should have done this before the fighting started.

Jorah reached out slowly to take it. “I will wear it with honor,” he said simply, handing Sam his dragonglass. “And I’ll return it to you after.”

“See that you do,” Sam replied.

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**Jon**

Wights with the bearing and dress of the Dothraki had started to appear amongst those coming through the breach, which told him how the fight outside the walls was faring. Cold fear and desperation began to fill his chest. It wasn’t a good sign. The dragons hadn’t been seen in some time now, and he’d not been able to focus long enough on Rhaegal to learn of his position.

It felt like he’d been fighting for days instead of hours, and but for the lack of sunrise he would have thought the former was more accurate. The clouds were heavy and he couldn’t see the sky at all. Maybe the sun had risen and they just couldn’t see it through the clouds and smoke.

A block of a curved arakh sent the blow vibrating through his arm, and he quickly pulled back to remove the dead Dothraki’s head from his body.

“Jon!” he turned to see Arya running towards him, blood down one side of her. “It’s not mine,” she said, skidding to a stop in front of him and noticing his likely horrified expression. “At least, not all
of it.” She was breathing hard. “I’ve just come from the east gate,” she continued. “The dead are starting to weaken it.”

Jaime has already sent someone to warn him of the broken western gate some hours ago, and now a third gate was in jeopardy. “How many men are there?” he asked her. Most of their remaining force inside the walls was here at the north, the largest breach, and he didn’t know if there were any he could spare.


That wouldn’t hold it if the gate was lost.

Further consideration of the problem was delayed as a group of wights broke away and headed straight for them. Jon stepped forward and cut two in half with a single sweep of Longclaw. Arya flipped her dagger out of its sheath and stabbed it into the face of another in one smooth motion.

Once the immediate danger was cleared, he grabbed her arm and pushed her towards the east gate. “Go!” he said sharply. “You’re in charge of the east gate now.”

She stared back at him with wide eyes, briefly overwhelmed by the responsibility. “What do I do?” she asked desperately.

Jon pulled her into a tight embrace and kissed the top of her head. “Don’t let them in,” he said as he broke away. “Whatever it takes. That gate cannot fall.”

Arya looked terrified for a moment, but he watched her face become resolute. “Yes, your Grace,” she said seriously, and then ran off into the smoke. Her acknowledgement of his title was a strange feeling. He didn’t like the fact that he’d just given her a command.

Once upon a time, in another life, he’d told a man named Grenn to hold a gate as well. Grenn, too, had followed it without question.

Would Arya suffer the same fate? Would she be another death on his conscience? He couldn’t linger too much on the thought or it would drive him mad.

Above him, dragons roared and clashed.

He couldn’t think too much about that either.

Jon threw himself into the fight again, the fear and helplessness he felt fueling his attacks. They continued to hold the breach for some time, but despite their efforts, despite everything he had the ability to do, the dead still pushed forward into the keep. He could feel his movements slowing. His arms were sore. There was still pain in his back and side from his fall. Too many times he just barely missed a jagged blade or a bony hand that threatened to end him.

Yet he continued to fight, summoning everything he had left.

A group of wights took advantage of slow reaction on his part to knock him backwards, hard, and he waited for the dead to swarm over him.

They didn’t.

As he fell to the ground, a familiar voice above him said something he didn’t understand, sinister and louder than it should have been possible to be. He looked up as a wave of fire pushed them back,
and a red-robed figure stepped between him and the advancing dead. Fire spread from the palm of her hand and burst out through the breach in the wall, staying the progress of the dead.

It was Melisandre who turned to look at him then, eyes like dark fires of their own, and she reached down a hand to help him to his feet. Her skin was hot to the touch. He could feel the warmth through his gloves. She was stronger than he expected, and pulled him from the ground with little effort.

“How did you get in here?” he demanded. The gates had been sealed for days, and further to that, based on Melisandre’s past actions, all guards had been instructed to apprehend her on sight.

“You need to leave,” she said, ignoring his question. Her voice sounded strange, layered, as if she were many people speaking at once. She maintained the tight grip on his forearm though he had long since righted himself.

Jon stared at her. “You can’t be serious.”

“You can’t win,” she insisted, her hold on his arm tight like a vice. “Not here. Gather your people and go south.”

“I can’t abandon my home,” Jon said angry and frustrated with her. “We can’t-”

“If you don’t leave now, all of you will die,” Melisandre said, snapping the last word at him like a curse. “Leave now to fight another day.”

The screams of the living and the screams of the dead surrounded them. The roars of the dragons filled his mind.

“How?” he asked desperately. “How can we leave? We’re surrounded. There’s no way we can get out of here without being slaughtered. This castle is the only protection we have for miles in any direction.”

Melisandre looked at him and he saw fire in her eyes. “I can provide you the protection that you need,” she said. “I have come with the strength of the Lord of Light and all his followers.”

As if in emphasis, fire seemed to crackle about her. Jon took a step back. She seemed to be a greater presence than the single figure of a lone priestess. He thought he was going mad; he blinked, and for a brief moment he thought he could see a hundred red-robed figures in the same space as she, but after a moment they had gone again.

Perhaps she was not speaking in exaggeration. Perhaps she could do as she claimed.

“My brothers and sisters will help you,” Melisandre continued. There was a darkness about her, and he stared both in wonder and in fear. “But you need to leave now, Jon Snow.”

He was still wracked with indecision. Behind her, he saw the dead began to swell again at the breach, the phalanx of Unsullied readying to meet them once more. There was only half that company left, and his call for reinforcements had gone unanswered.

The Red Witch was still leveling a gaze at him, eyes piercing. “Leave,” she repeated. “If you don’t, they will all fall to the dead. Your sister, your people. The dragons.” He closed his eyes briefly in pain as she continued, and above them Drogon roared. Melisandre looked up into the sky as fire raged, and so did he. “Your wife,” she continued, further listing the things he could lose. “And your child.”
Jon whipped his head down from the sky to look at her. “I don’t have a child.”

Melisandre regarded him with a sad compassion. “It’s likely she has not realized it for herself,” she said, and confusion at her cryptic words began to morph into a cold dread. He was finding it hard to breathe and he stared at the witch with wide eyes, waiting for her clarify her words somehow. She gave no indication that she spoke in exaggeration or falsehoods or futures; only truth.

He both wanted to believe it and didn’t. How could this be something Melisandre could know? Yet frustratingly, now that she’d said it, now that the possibility was in his head, he had no choice to but act as if it were fact.

It was a strange juxtaposition; to be caught in such a storm of terror and hope.

The Hound ran up to them then, and Jorah followed at his side, blood covering one side of his face. “We’re losing the breach again,” The Hound said. “We need more-”

The roar of dragons cut off the rest of his words. It was so loud that Jon felt his bones shaking within him. He turned to the sky and watched in horror as Drogon and Viserion crashed down into the Godswood, trembling the very earth beneath them. Flame erupted in an explosion of heat and he shielded his eyes from it. Drogon loomed high above the trees, wings folded down as he pinned a thrashing Viserion to the ground.

He could not see Daenerys.

I shall wear no crowns and win no glory.

Drogon roared, loud and terrible, and then Jon watched as his head snaked down to the neck of Viserion. Claws and teeth sent dragon scales flying everywhere like large, black hail, the sound of it like glass and metal being rent apart. It set his teeth on edge to hear it. He lifted his arms up to shield his face from the sharp debris. Blue flame burst through the Godswood, and then Drogon bore down on the smaller dragon, keeping him down. More blue flames were sent up into the sky.

With another roar that shook the earth, Drogon pulled his head up sharply and tore Viserion’s neck from his body. Bones and dust and dragonscales showered over them all, and Drogon roared once more, a heartrending, anguished sound that rang loudly in his ears. In his mind, he thought he felt Rhaegal answer it with equal grief.

Then there was silence.

All Jon could hear was the sound of his own heart pounding in his chest. His mouth was dry and his breath came in a hard struggle. He was overwhelmed by the grief of the dragons and the weight of the words Melisandre had spoken. It was a gargantuan effort to pull himself back into the situation at hand.

I shall live and die at my post.
“Ser Jorah,” he said, once he was able to get his mouth to form words again. “Go see if Daenerys is in there and tell her to leave,” he said, his voice a tense command through clenched teeth. “Tell her to fly Drogon to Castle Cerwyn and stay there until I arrive.” He was desperately fighting the instinct to do so himself. That was his family, his future, and he wanted to run to her, to protect her, to ensure her escape. He looked at Jorah straight in the eye. “I don’t care what you have to do, but she does not stay here any longer, do you understand?”

The older knight returned his gaze with one of shock and confusion at his command, but he nodded his understanding of his task. “Aye, your Grace,” he said firmly, and then sprinted off towards the Godswood.

*I am the sword in the darkness.*

His mind was already shooting through half-formed plans. He called for Rhaegal, knowing this would reveal the secret he’d wanted to keep hidden away. It didn’t matter now. He had to get Arya out no matter what it took.

He turned to The Hound. “Go find Jaime and tell him to sound a retreat,” Jon instructed even as he called again for Rhaegal. He felt like he was being pulled in all directions. He needed to find Arya. He needed to see Drogon in the sky. “Go, *now!*” he repeated, the strain clear in his voice.

*I am the watcher on the walls.*

At his side, Melisandre stiffened. “He is here,” she whispered.

*I am the shield that guards the realms of men.*

“Where?” he demanded, and called for Rhaegal again.

The dragon did not answer.
Chapter End Notes

Let me know what you think.
Jaime

The western gate was battling a third giant. Though arrows continued to be largely ineffective, he and Grey Worm had discovered that the dragonglass spears of the Unsullied were enough to bring them down, when properly utilized.

However, they’d only managed to dispatch one with that method. The second was taken out with pitch set aflame, creating a temporary stop gap to address the wounded and reform the lines.

This one, however, was proving difficult. He was wild and erratic enough that they couldn’t get close, and he was widening the gap with each swing of his club. Blue eyes glowed menacingly from a height too far above them.

“We need to draw his attention,” he said. “One group to the side, and another to stab him in the back.”

“Why don’t you distract him, Kingslayer?” Lord Glover snapped, blood dried and crusted along his jaw and a sharp irritation in his eye. “Wave your golden hand around and see if he fancies it.”

“Now is not the time,” Brienne sprung to his defense.

He waved a hand at her to get her to stand down. He was used to it by now. “I’ll keep that under advisement, Lord Glover, should all other reasonable ideas fail.”

“I think we’ve tried just about all the reasonable ideas to be had,” Lord Manderly interjected.

The giant smashed at the wall again, sending stone flying over them in huge, head crushing chunks. He barely had time to call out a warning before one came flying towards him.

And then Brienne was there, pushing him out of the way. Stone glanced off the armor of his shoulder, jarring his arm, but as he stumbled to his feet, Brienne did not. Worry and fear swamped him. He called for her.

Brienne struggled to rise. He rushed over. His hand grasped her forearm to help her to her feet and it came away sticky and wet with blood.
“I’m alright,” Brienne said, pain obvious in her voice.

“Stand up on your own and I’ll believe you,” he said, reaching for her again.

The giant roared behind him, loud and growling, and he whirled around to see it swing the club around in a large sweeping motion, cutting a large gash through the Northmen and Unsullied trying to keep him in the ruins of the western gate. He pulled Brienne up and had her leaning into him, taking most of her weight as one of her legs kept collapsing beneath her.

The two of them struggled over to a place out of the way and he rather ungracefully set her against the wall. She slid slowly downwards until she was on the ground, leaving a trail of red against the stone. The sight was upsetting. He tried to remain focused on the task at hand.

“Brienne!” he snapped at her urgently, trying to get her to focus. “Brienne, look at me!”

Her eyes looked at him slowly, as if dazed. “I’ll be fine,” she insisted.

“I’ve never known you to be a liar, Brienne, and I’d hate for you to start now,” Jaime replied dryly. He felt her eyes linger on him as he reached forward for the buckle to the shoulder guard. He was about to pull it away when the giant roared again. The sound of crumbling stone accompanied it. Brienne stared over his shoulder, wide-eyed at the sight behind him.

“What is he doing?” she asked, aghast.

Jaime whipped around to look at what she indicated. The giant was standing in the breach of the wall, and on top of one side was Grey Worm, spear aloft, looking down from the crumbling edge. Then, to his disbelief, the Unsullied commander jumped down and sank his glittering black spear deep into the back of the giant’s neck.

For a moment, nothing happened. Then the giant fell forward and shattered onto the ground. Grey Worm held the shaft of his spear tightly as this happened, riding the giant down before pulling it out and jumping free just short of it’s collapse.

It was an unreasonable, mad sort of thing to do, and even though Jaime had witnessed it with his own eyes he still struggled to believe it.

The fall of the giant had blocked the breach in the wall temporarily, but the tide of dead would not be stemmed for long. He could see Lord Glover barking orders to Northmen to reform the lines.

Jaime turned back to Brienne. “If you die I will be extremely put out with you,” he said to her firmly.

She continued staring at him. “You don’t have to stay here.”

“No, I don’t,” he acknowledged, and made no move to depart. Instead he busied himself with removing pieces of her armor to try and find where she was bleeding from. It was slow going with just the one hand, but he focused solely on it and not on her face, which he knew was full of questions he couldn’t answer.

He ripped a piece of his cloak from the hem using the heel of his boot and wadded it up, pressing it to the wound on her shoulder, then he grabbed her hand and pressed it in place. “Hold that still,” he ordered, and she obeyed.

Once satisfied that she was out of any immediate danger, Jaime looked around towards the gate and tried to find Grey Worm. He wanted to leave him in charge while he got her farther back behind the lines, and they could use some more of his mad fucking ideas.
Footsteps from his other side came hurrying forth, and he half turned with a hand on the pomme of his sword.

It was the Hound. He relaxed a bit, but not entirely. “What is it?” he asked, seeing the urgency there before a single word was spoken.

“Jon ordered a retreat,” Clegane said. “Wants you to get everyone out through Wintertown.”

Jaime stared back at him in disbelief. “Retreat?” he asked, dumbfounded. That wasn’t in the carefully laid plans that he and Jon had been crafting for weeks. “And how does he suggest we do that exactly?”

“He didn’t elaborate.”

Of course he didn’t.

“Is Arya still with him?” Brienne asked desperately.

The Hound furrowed his brow, but only slightly. “I didn’t see her,” he said.

Brienne struggled to rise, but Jaime held her down. “And what do you think you’re doing?” he asked her.

“Arya,” she said, fearfult. “Arya. I have to find her. I have to get her out.”

“You’re not finding anyone,” Jaime told her sharply.

“I swore an oath-“

“Oh will you shut up about that?” Sandor snapped, interrupting. “I’ll help you keep your damn oath.”

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**Daenerys**

She grasped tightly at the spines before her, but as Drogon crashed into the Godswood they finally slipped from her fingers. She fell back as he pinned Viserion to the ground, the sound of trees snapping beneath them loud in her ears. Desperately, she scrambled to save herself from falling all the way down, but everything before her was just smooth scales, dark and shining in the fire.

Blue flame shot into the sky as she tumbled downward, and a movement from Drogon sent her ungracefully tossed onto the ground near his back leg. She hit the ground on all fours. The impact sent jarring pain through her hands and knees. Snow and ash swirled about her in a cloud. The dragons thundereed, and her heart pounded loud in her ears as she tried to get clear. Drogon’s tail passed above her, leveling trees as it did so, and she ducked just soon enough to avoid it. Branches fell around her, tearing at her clothes and her hair. She needed to get out of here or she would be crushed.

Viserion screched. Her heart broke.

Smoke stung her eyes and made them water. She couldn’t tell where she was at first; the Godswood was destroyed so thoroughly that it was impossible to find her bearings. She scrambled over fallen trees, falling twice and scraping her hands hard through her gloves. Her hair was falling into her face and she could see that it was discolored with ash and dirt and blood.
The heat of fire surrounded her. The warring of the dragons shook the ground beneath her. She was filled with both the depth of Drogon’s fury and of her own grief as she watched them fight, magnifying a hundredfold as it came to a brutal, inevitable end. Drogon ripped Viserion apart, piece by piece. She was showered in dragon scales as a result, and immediately fell to her knees and vomited, unable to bear the sight of one child tearing into the other. In her mind, clear as the melting snow beneath her, she held Viserion in her hands, the small gold dragon chirping at her like a little bird. She stood at Dragonstone and watched them fly low over the ocean. Three of them, together. Stone to eggs to life.

Drogon roared, and she felt his grief as well her own.

Tears fell and hit the ground below her as she knelt there, overwhelmed. The earth was cold through her gloves and snow melted to soak her knees. She took a sharp, painful breath that was less an inhale and more a desperate grab for air.

Slowly, she pulled herself up. Drogon was in a fit of madness and anger, and she would not be able to mount him again until he settled. A fiery branch crashed close by her, sending sparks flying. She felt them pepper her. It was too dangerous to stay in here.

Through the branches of the trees, she saw the stone wall just ahead and made her way towards it. If she went to the right, it would take her to the entrance and into the path of Drogon. She tried to remember if there was another way out by the north gate to her left, but she didn’t think there was. She’d only been in the Godswood once before. One way in, one way out.

She went left anyway to discover that part of the wall had crumbled in the fight. Running forward, she pulled herself up and climbed over the broken stone. Some of them were heated still from the fire, and she pulled her gloves off and tossed them away. She was able to crawl through into the back of what appeared to be the armory, empty but for some shields and steel blades that had dulled with age.

The sounds of fighting were more apparent now and she pulled the dragonglass dagger from her belt, holding it low as Jon had shown her. She cracked open the door just enough to peer outwards. There was no one near, and that bothered her. There should be more people.

How many had they lost?

Daenerys edged the door open a bit more, clutching the dagger so hard that her fingers began to throb.

Hurried footsteps crunched in the snow, and she whipped around to see Jon there, running through the hallway. He stopped when he saw her, surprised, horrified, breathing hard. Ash streaked across his face and his hair was coming loose, but otherwise he did not appear significantly injured, for which she was beyond grateful.

“Daenerys,” he breathed, and she felt tears in her eyes again as he embraced her hard and then pulled back, hands on either side of her face as he looked her over in much the same way she had done to him. “Are you hurt?”

She shook her head. “I’m alright,” she said.

“I sent Jorah to find you,” he said. “We’re retreating for Castle Cerwyn. I’ve already sent the signal for the Dothraki to withdraw.”

“Retreating?” she repeated, not understanding but inside she was relieved at the words. A retreat
meant they would live. A retreat meant that there was still more time.

His face was set in a determined frown. “I will explain it later,” he said. “I need to find Arya and we all need to leave.”

“I’m not going without you,” she insisted. “Come with me-”

“I will follow,” he said, kissing her once, briefly, as if the act would seal his promise to her. There was a slight hesitation in his bearing, as if he wanted to say something else but thought better of it. “I love you,” he said, kissing her again. “Please go.”

There were more footsteps, and they both looked up to see Ser Jorah rounding the corner past them. He looked horrifying; half his face was darkened with blood. “How did you get out?” Jorah asked her, relief in his face. “I just came from the entrance. It’s blocked and melted shut-”

“There’s a hole in the wall through here,” she explained, pointing to the doorway behind her.

“Go back through it and leave,” Jon said firmly.

She looked at him, unwilling to move, unwilling to let him go. “Come with me,” she begged her husband yet again.

Jon pulled away from her, looking pained but resolute. She hated it. “Jorah, get her out of here!” he commanded, a fire in his eyes like she had never seen.

“No, I won’t-” she started to protest, but Jorah grabbed her and began to pull her back. She struggled against the knight, but he held her tightly. “Jon!” she screamed.

“Go!” Jon said to her. “Please! I’ll be right behind you.” And with that, he turned and hurried back towards the courtyard.

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Arya

She felt them up against the wood, pushing and scraping and clawing at it as she threw her weight against it to keep it closed. Several bannermen came to her aid, but it was only delaying the inevitable.

Wood splintered near her ear, cutting it sharply. She felt the stinging pain of it and the warmth of blood as it ran into her hair and down her neck. She turned towards the hole in the door to see blue eyes and a desiccated face staring back at her. She buried her dagger to the hilt into what remained of it. As soon as it crumbled, another took its place.

“They’re going to break through,” Lord Cerwyn said, his armor shining with blood and gore as it caught the light of the fire all around them. He barked orders to what men remained, but the dead were tearing through the doors faster than they could shore them up.

A small phalanx of Unsullied stood with Northmen, and Arya continued to help hold the gate as best she could with whoever remained.

Suddenly, the door became unbearably cold. She pulled away on reflex, as did the others, and the dead beyond it stilled.

Fear gripped her.
“What’s happening?” someone asked, and she didn’t have an answer.

“Get back,” she said to the others, cold dread in the pit of her stomach, and they were only able to half-follow her before the door burst open, shattering into a thousand pieces and sending bits of wood and iron shooting over everyone. She felt something cut hard across her face as she fell to the ground.

At her side, someone scrambled to her and offered a hand up. Lord Cerwyn. The dead poured through the gate and men swarmed past them both to meet them.

Even as she stood on shaking legs, Arya pulled out her bow and shot two that managed to break through the ranks of the Unsullied. It was a paltry effort. They would need a better solution.

“Whatever it takes. That gate cannot fall.”

Jon’s command played over and over in her mind as she searched for a way to solve the problem. Fire? There could still be pitch on the walls yet that they could use-

Something she couldn’t see blew through the Unsullied as if they were merely clay soldiers standing at attention. Horrified, she watched as her forces dwindled sharply, frozen with fear and indecision.

Then, a figure appeared in the gate that did not look like one of the dead.

He must have been the Night King. He looked just as Jon had described; a white figure, tall, his features pointed and sinister. His armor was dark and strange, and ice adorned his head like a crown. In his hands, a spear glittered in the light of the fire.

It was only a split second more that she froze there, shocked into stillness, before she raised her bow. The arrow flew towards him faster than she had ever shot anything, but not only did it miss, he deliberately and calmly stepped from it’s path. She reached backwards for another, and a cold hand grabbed her instead. Arya whirled around to see another like him, a skeletal face with blue eyes looking down at her dispassionately and curiously, an intelligence behind them that the wights did not have. White hair was long on both his head and his face. The grip burned her like fire, and she screamed.

Quickly, she dropped her bow and reached for the dagger at the small her back, whipping it forward and then plunging it into the Other’s chest. It seemed to stare at her in shock, and then she felt the grip on her hand release as it shattered into ice and snow.

Where before the Night King had regarded her as an annoyance, he now looked downright predatory.

He slew five men without effort as he made his way towards her.

“Run!” Lord Cerwyn shouted to her, blood dripping down his face from a cut above his eye. He was stepping in between them. “Run!”

She picked up her bow and bolted.

She needed time to think. There was no way she could fight him by herself. Not when he dodged arrows as if they were merely a soft-tossed ball. Her heart was pounding. She needed Jon. He could help them. He would know what to do.

Arya skidded around a corner, but a combination of fire from the dragons and the claws of the dead blocked her way. She was forced to double back down towards the Great Hall to circumvent them,
dashing through unlit stone hallways as fast as she could manage.

In here it was easy to pretend that their home wasn’t on fire. The screams and the sounds of fighting did not make their way into the deep center of the keep. She leaned against the wall to catch her breath. Each one burned in her chest.

Footsteps echoed down the hallway towards her, and she looked up to see blue eyes in the dark.

She sprinted away again, towards the courtyard, hoping she would run into someone that had a tougher and stronger sword than she.

When she turned the corner onto the breezeway a blow hit her hard in the chest, sending her some distance backwards along it. Her head knocked painfully against the wood and she lay there, stunned. She could barely move, and it seemed as if the world had stopped moving with her. The blow was crushing and pain blossomed in her chest.

She stared as the Night King advanced upon her, trying to catch her breath. Ash floated in the air between them. Behind him, the Godswood burned.

How many times has she walked along this path, staring out into the courtyard? How many times had she seen her father standing here, watching them play? How many times had she run along it, laughing, as Bran had chased her?

And now, here at the end, would she would die upon it?

She heard her name being called through the fog of pain and memories that swirled in her mind. She tried to reach for her dagger, but her limbs did not obey her.

“Arya!”

There was movement on the breezeway and she finally felt the strength to raise herself. Her arms ached as she tried to push herself up.

“Arya!” It was Jon calling for her, but all she saw was the Night King stalking towards her, blue eyes cold and piercing; his face a hungry, terrifying mask.

His spear was raised up now. Clear ice as sharp as a razor gleamed down at her. Air caught in her chest as she tried to scramble to her feet, but her movements felt slow and sluggish, as if she were moving through mud. Her heart was beating wildly, and all she could hear was the pounding of it in her ears.

Needle wouldn’t stand a chance. She had neither the strength nor the length of arm to block a strike from him. As she scrambled backwards her hands fell on the bow that she had dropped. Seizing it, she held it in front of her and reached back behind her head to grab a dragonglass arrow. She hardly had any left. There was a sharp, agonizing pain in her shoulder as she pulled the string back but she pushed through it.

With shaking fingers she set her arrow and drew it back. Should she aim for the head? The heart? There was no time to decide. He was marching towards her with unrelenting focus. She loosed an arrow, missed, and it buried itself in the wooden beam over his shoulder.

She readied another arrow, moving back all the while. She knew there wasn’t much room left for her to go.

Nock. Draw. She heard Jon saying the words calmly in her mind.
She stumbled into a pile of broken stone and her arrow clattered to the ground. The Night King raised his spear and she went again for the dagger sheathed at her back. Maybe she could throw it -

Before she could wrap her hand around the hilt, the spear was blocked and Jon was there between them. Relief washed over her.

Jon would finish this and it would be done. Her brother pushed the Night King back, his sword ringing against the ice. Arya hurried to pick up the arrow she dropped, setting and aiming quickly. It was difficult; there wasn’t a good shot that didn’t also have Jon at risk of taking it instead. Her grip was tight and she tried to take a deep breath to relax.

Jon parried glancing blows and difficult ones, but he held his ground and pushed the Night King back away from her. The greatest swordsman the North had ever seen is how her brother had been frequently described, and she believed it. He would finish this and everyone would be safe.

Breathe. Breathe.

She focused harder than she’d ever done before. As she sent the arrow flying she willed it to find its target more than anything she’d wished for in her entire life.

Her arrow buried itself deep into the Night King’s chest. Had he been a living man, it would have torn his heart to shreds.

But he wasn’t, and it didn’t.

Instead, she watched, horrified, as the Night King pinned Jon against the wall with one hand and ripped her arrow out with another as if it were a mere annoyance. With a swift motion, he buried it into Jon’s shoulder.

She cried out. Her brother did not. Blue eyes stared into hers with cold focus.

Despite the arrow, it was the moment Jon needed. He broke free of the Night King’s grip and plunged Longclaw into his chest.

Time seemed to stand still.

Would the Night King shatter as the Other at the east gate had done?

No, it seemed. She watched in horror, her last arrow half at the ready, as the Night King reached forward and snapped Longclaw’s blade as if it were merely kindling.

It hadn’t worked.

Jon didn’t get out of the way in time, and she was too slow to react. The Night King pushed him to the ground as he tried to step back and grab the dagger at his belt. Arya let loose her final arrow as Jon fell hard onto the wooden planks of the breezeway. It hit the Night King through the throat.

He didn’t even acknowledge it, and the strangled cry barely left her lips before the spear was brought down with swift strength.

It went through Jon as if he wore no armor at all.

The world went silent.

All she could see was the blood that spread across the snowy breezeway, all she could hear was the dull thud of Jon’s boots as he struggled against the force of the spear; the wet, ragged gasps as he
tried desperately to breathe, the sickening crunch as the Night King continued to press the spear down further and further. A hellish eternity passed and she watched, frozen in horror, as her brother stilled and his body went slack.

A scream ripped through the air, and it took a moment for Arya to realize it was her. Tears blurred her vision.

The Night King shifted his attention from Jon to focus on her once more, and she tried to fight the ice cold terror that began to consume her. Scrambling back, she tried to grab at her dagger, wondering what good it would do. Both dragonglass and Valyrian steel had failed. She had nothing.

Leaving the spear, the Night King took the jagged remains of Longclaw in his hand and she watched as ice slowly began to grow along the broken blade to form another weapon.

Arya wondered if Sansa and Bran would reach Dragonstone. If they would ever learn what happened here.

She gripped the hilt of her dagger tightly and braced herself against the wall.

Suddenly, a woman stepped in between them. She was tall, with long hair and red robes, and Arya did not see where she had come from. The woman seemed to glow with a strange light as she spoke, her voice a deep timbre that echoed as if a hundred people spoke with her. The Night King paused, his eyes intense and cold, then he raised Longclaw to strike her down.

With a command and a gesture, the woman in red pushed her hands out towards the Night King, throwing him back through the wall behind him with flame and darkness. Stone crumbled and the breezeway shook beneath her as fire in the shape of men materialized and grew in strength. The heat of it seared her face.

After a moment, the fire faded and the Night King was gone. The flames had pushed him back through the stone and into the side of the nearest tower with violence. The force of it pulled stone and wood down and Arya watched as a part of the Great Keep collapsed downward in a pile of fire and smoke.

Her home, destroyed.

The woman seemed to fade and her shoulders slumped, as if exhausted. Arya pushed around her to go to Jon, falling to her knees at his side. His eyes stared blankly upwards, one hand coated red with his own blood and limply gripped around the spear shaft.

“Jon,” she begged, her voice raspy through the smoke and tears, grabbing his face to turn him to look at her. He did not respond.

He was dead.

She let out a sob as she gripped tightly to spear and tried to pull it out, tears falling down her face to soak into the fur at her collar. Despite using all her strength, the spear wouldn’t budge even as she pulled and pulled. It was freezing cold to the touch and she wrapped her hands in her cloak to try again.

The red woman knelt down by her brother’s head, and it was then that Arya realized who she was. She seemed to have aged decades since their encounter in the Riverlands, but she would never forget the face that took Gendry from her. “Get away from him!” Arya yelled at her, grief choking her words. How could she be here? Why was she here? She didn’t want her near her brother.
"You need to leave," the witch said to her, ignoring her demand. "He is not defeated. We have merely bought you time."

"Time for what?" she asked, pulling on the spear again. Tears stung her eyes.

"Arya!"

She whirled around to see The Hound staring up at her from the foot of the stairs. He climbed up them two at a time and took in the violence of the scene before him. “Come on,” he said to her after a moment, extending a hand out for her to take, as if she were merely a child that had gotten lost. “We’re leaving.”

She stared at him, not understanding.

“He ordered a retreat,” the Hound said, pointing down to Jon. “Do as he said. Let’s go.”

Tears welled in her eyes. “I’m not going without him,” she insisted, her voice breaking as she tried once more to free the spear and it did not budge. “I’m not leaving him.” Arya began to feel cold as the reality of what had occurred began to catch up with her. “He told me to hold the gate,” she said, choking on the words. “He asked me to do it and I failed.” She took a shuddering breath. “I failed and now he’s…” She couldn’t even think the word without her throat closing shut. “And now he’s dead.”

The Hound stared at her for a moment. “The Night King was going to get in no matter what you did,” he told her, then firmly but gently pushed her to the side.

The red witch looked up at them both as The Hound wrapped his hands about the handle of the Night King’s spear. “The Lord of Light has given you a purpose,” she said to him, her voice layered. It made Arya’s skin crawl.

The Hound wrenched the spear from Jon, pulling it free and tossing it to the ground as if it burned him. The noise it made would haunt her for the rest of her life. “I don’t know fuck all about that,” he replied to the witch, short and impatient. He knelt down to pull Jon up and over his shoulder.

As he did so, Arya could see the spear had gone right through the wood of the breezeway. She could see down into the the bloody snow below. The sight filled her with an all-consuming numbness.

The Hound had already started down the stairs before she realized she was still frozen, staring at the bloody stain where her brother had died.

“You can mourn him later,” The Hound called to her, his harsh tone cracking across her like a whip. “No sense in you dying too. Get moving or I’ll find someone to carry you out as well.”

“Go,” the witch urged, pushing her gently towards the stairs.

“Don’t touch me,” Arya said sharply, stepping out of her reach. The woman’s face filled her with anger and hatred. The woman had just saved her life, but why was Arya spared and Jon was not? Why had Arya been left with the Brotherhood while this witch stole away one of her dearest friends?

The woman seemed to know what she was thinking, and dared to show remorse. “I will buy you time to escape,” she said, her voice still layered and strange. “Find the queen, go south. Live to fight again.”

Arya blinked, and then, as if in a stupor, she followed The Hound through the courtyard. As she departed she looked back and saw the witch place herself in the center of it, fire glowing in the palm
of her hand. Above them, Drogon roared, showering the ground below him in sparks and scales and blood as he leapt into the air from the burning Godsfwood.

The closer they got to the southern gate, the more people there were, all rushing past. No one noticed them or gave them a second look in their haste to leave. Ahead, she saw Sam Tarly with one of the last remaining carts.

The Hound made his way towards him. “Got room on this?” he asked.

“I’m sorry, not for a dead man,” Sam said, only sparing them the barest glance as he helped a soldier load a girl about Arya’s age into the back of it, leg mangled horribly below the knee and tears in her eyes. Arya watched the scene as if she weren’t a part of it, as if it were some nightmare that would cease once she awoke.

“You should make an exception,” the Hound replied. Sam looked up sharply in response, and Arya watched his face go from confusion to shock to despair as he realized who they carried, and then his gaze drifted to her, looking for confirmation that he wasn’t seeing it, waiting for her to say that Jon was just unconscious, or wounded, but she could not give it to him.

A tear ran down her face.

Sam slowly moved to the side, and they all watched silently as The Hound placed her brother in the back of the cart next to the injured girl, who stared in horror at what was left of her king.

“What if he...turns?” the girl asked, clearly upset that the question even needed to be asked.

“He won’t,” Arya said after a moment, her voice a dull monotone. “He’s got dragonglass in him.” She could just barely see the broken end of her arrow sticking up out of his shoulder. She climbed up into the back of the wagon and placed herself between her brother and the rest of them.

“What happened?” Sam asked, distraught, unable to tear his eyes away.

“He fought the Night King,” Arya answered quietly as The Hound pulled himself up into the front seat. “And he lost.”

Just then, a loud booming sound echoed from the center of her home. Arya looked up to see one of the last round towers still standing begin to slowly crumble and fall, consumed by fire. Wights, unencumbered now due to the retreat, appeared through the yard and ran straight for them.

“We’re leaving,” The Hound snapped. Sam knelt down beside the girl with the mangled leg. The wagon lurched forward. Arya held her brother’s head in her lap to steady it, and the young bannerman that had been helping Sam ran to leap onto the back as they began to pull away. The wights still chased them.

Fire began to consume her home. It wasn’t dragonfire, or the lighted pitch. It was a hotter, more intense flame, both unnaturally bright and full of dark shadows at the same time, climbing higher and higher out from the center. She stared at them as they consumed Winterfell entirely, and she thought she could see faces within it.

More wights began to join the first group, all tearing after them. The bannerman readied his bow, and Arya grabbed her dagger.

They were the last to leave, and shortly after they passed through under the arch of the southern gate.
the last tower fell, and that same, unnatural fire burst out in all directions.

“Go faster!” she shouted to the Hound, realizing they weren’t going to escape it, and the words barely left her mouth before the fire caught up to them. She brought her hands up to shield her face, but all she felt was a warmth as it passed. She looked up to see the wights had not been given similar immunity; they had all crumbled mid-stride.

She stared back in muted horror as Winterfell burned, lighting the night in a red, hellish glow. The hard wood of the wagon pressed against her back. The skin of her brother’s face was pale and cold between her hands. His head was heavy in her lap.

“When the snows fall and the white winds blow, the lone wolf dies, but the pack survives.”

The voice of her father came to her as she stared at the ruins of her home, smaller and smaller as they continued on down the road.

At least, she thought it was how her father had sounded. It had been so long since she’d heard his voice that she couldn’t be sure she’d recognize it even if he should appear before her now and speak. She hardly recalled his face either, just a blurry recollection of a child’s memories.

She begged the gods for her father now, desperate for comfort and clarity. The pack had been together, but now it was just her again, alone, mourning another dead brother and surrounded by nothing but the cold grip of darkness.

Chapter End Notes

so did that go the way you thought it would or no
The North starts to regroup at Castle Cerwyn.

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Drogon landed hard in the snow outside Castle Cerwyn. He was still wild and hard to control, and even in the darkness she could see blood spattering the white snow beneath him. She murmured soothing words as she ran her hand along the scales of his back and wondered if he even registered her touch at all.

There were swarms of disorganized people, all wondering what had happened and what to do. She could feel Drogon getting wild and upset again, and so she turned and gestured for Jorah to dismount quickly. She needed to send the dragon back into the air and away from the castle.

Her boots crunched into the deep snow. Jorah was there to catch her as she stumbled, and she hastened them forward as she tried to catch her balance. Drogon roared angrily before shooting into the air. Blood fell from him and hissed in the snow as it landed. Daenerys felt some hit her in the face but she paid it no mind. She watched Drogon disappear into the night, her heart aching in her chest.

“You should go inside,” Jorah said quietly, the steady grip he’d had on her arms loosening and then falling away.

With one last look skyward, she nodded in agreement and started to walk forward towards the gate. Only a few hundred or so Dothraki had made it to Castle Cerwyn so far, and the sliver of conversation she’d managed to overhear as she passed them showed that they were terrified and restless. That was not a good combination.

Tyrion and Ser Davos met them at the gate, both wearing identical expressions of worry and confusion.

“What happened?” her Hand asked as soon as she was within hearing distance.

“I’m not sure,” she replied, her voice hoarse from the smoke and the shouting. She kept walking forward, and Tyrion hurried to remain at her side. “I need a map. Is there a map here?”

“We have a room set up this way, your Grace,” Ser Davos said, pulling forward to lead her through the unfamiliar halls of Castle Cerwyn.

They walked in silence. Daenerys could tell the Tyrion was waiting impatiently for details. She struggled to keep her mind straight as she contemplated an answer to his question. What happened indeed. To be honest, she wasn’t entirely sure herself. Everything was a big, confusing mess.
Thankfully, Jorah spoke instead. “Jon ordered a retreat,” he said from behind her, his voice echoing off the stone.


Ser Davos opened up a plain door to the left and Daenerys strode inside to a large room with a plain wooden table, maps and lighted candles strewn about it.

“We don’t know why,” Daenerys replied as the door closed behind them. She put her palms face down on the table and leaned forward, head and shoulders bowing with the weight of everything she had seen. “I’m not an experienced tactician,” she murmured into the silence. “But I know we were losing.”

“I was under the impression from Jon that if we didn’t win at Winterfell then that would be the end,” Tyrion said slowly.

The words hung unanswered in the air.

“So is it?” he asked when he got no reply. “The end, I mean.” He was trying to sound unaffected, but his own uncertainty and fear was clear enough to her.

She sighed. “I’m not ready to give up,” she said firmly. “But I am curious to know Jon’s reasons.”

“I was near him when he ordered it,” Jorah said quietly after a while. “He had been speaking to someone. A woman in red.”

Daenerys looked up and frowned. “A woman in red?” she repeated, not sure she had understood him. “Who was she?”

He hesitated. “I’m not sure,” he admitted. “but Jon seemed to know her. She wasn’t dressed to fight and she held no weapons. I’m not sure how she got there in the first place.”

There was a long silence. “I know who it was,” Ser Davos said, something dark in the tone of his voice. They all turned to look at him, and Daenerys waited for him to explain. “Before Jon became King in the North, a Red Priestess from Asshai traveled with us,” he continued. “Melisandre is her name, and she used to serve Stannis Baratheon.”

The name rang clear as a bell in her memory, and she shared a look of recognition with Tyrion. His own frown of confusion likely matched hers.

“I have met Melisandre,” she said slowly, and Davos looked like the mere mention of the woman’s name would send him into a fit of rage. She wondered why Jon had never mentioned her before. “I take it she did not depart your company on good terms.”

Davos was silent for a moment, and then he sighed. “No, I can’t say that she did,” he replied. He turned to Jorah. “Do you know what she said to him?” he asked. His tone, though measured, also indicated fear and Daenerys did not like it.

“I didn’t hear it all,” Jorah confessed. “But whatever she said seemed to terrify him. I could see it in his face. Jon ordered the retreat soon after.”

The words were worrying and ominous. Daenerys tried not to think of what could possibly have scared Jon to such lengths that he ordered an immediate retreat. It made her blood seem to run cold and she shivered.
“Are we safe here?” she asked them quietly.

“For now,” Tyrion said. “But this castle can’t be defended like Winterfell can. If we have to fight again we will need to go south.”

“How far south?”

“I don’t know,” he admitted. “I’m hoping the king will be able to shed some light on that.”

Daenerys ran her hands across her face with a sigh, pushing stray tendrils of hair from her eyes. “I assume Jorah and I are the first to arrive.”

“Aside from scattered groups of Dothraki, yes.”

“It will take some time for the bulk of the armies to make their way here,” Jorah added. “It’s a near half-day journey on horseback, even in clear weather.”

She stared at one of the maps before her, the drawings of Winterfell and Castle Cerwyn seemed both too close and too far from each other. It was a short distance, but still too much open space for her liking. “Keep me apprised of the numbers,” she said to the three of them. “And if any more of our commanders appear, send them here to me.” There were nods of assent and murmurs of understanding. “Tyrion, you will stay a moment longer,” she added as they made to leave.

Her Hand remained standing at the other end of the table, the scar across his face and the perpetual furrow of his brow accentuated deeply by the shadows in the room. She felt him staring at her, the gaze lingering on her missing gloves and bloodied hair.

“Are you hurt?” he asked her after a period of more silence.

She contemplated the question carefully. Most of what hurt was superficial; cuts from the trees in the godswood, bruising from her fall from Drogon. “No,” she said. “Not seriously.”

He fidgeted with the edge of the table. “That’s good to hear,” he said quietly.

Daenerys looked across the table at the varied maps and the waning candlesticks. “Is it just me, or has this night seemed to have lasted longer than most?” she asked. There was a feeling of deep weariness in her bones. It felt like she’d been awake for days.

“No, it’s not just you,” he replied, a hint of something in his voice. “These candles have been replaced three times since it was daylight last.”

Daenerys looked at them, and then out the small window to the darkness outside. “How is that possible?” she asked, picking one up by the base. They were of the same size and shape as those used at Winterfell; made to last from dusk to sunrise.

“I’m having a hard time believing it myself,” Tyrion said. “But Ser Davos and I spent many hours in here watching them shrink.” He let out a short sigh. “It’s hard to ignore the truth when it’s right in front of your eyes.”

“Yet some still manage it,” Daenerys said, setting the candle back down. “Are you telling me that it has been almost two days since I’ve seen you?”

He walked forward to look out the window and down to the courtyard below. “Yes, that’s the theory,” he answered, then looked back to her. “And here I assumed ‘The Long Night’ was just poetic exaggeration.”
She joined him at his side, wrapping her hands tightly about herself. The steel cuirass was hard and unyielding against her forearms, but she found the heavy tightness of it a comfort now instead of a burden.

What kind of evil was it that could prevent the sun itself from rising? How could they win against something with that kind of power? Is that what had frightened Jon so terribly that he’d ordered a retreat they had not planned for? She wished desperately for him now; not only to seek comfort in his presence but so that he could shed some light on what he knew. She hated not having all the information. It made her nervous and uneasy.

When Jon had ordered Jorah to take her away, she had heard a fear in his voice she’d not known before, and that had scared her as well.

A cloth and warm water to clean her face was brought to her after a while, as well as some plain stew that she forced herself to eat. She did not have the stomach for food and was afraid she’d throw it up again as soon as swallowing, but if as much time had passed as Tyrion claimed, she wasn’t going to skip another meal. Who knows when she’d have the opportunity to eat again, and she needed to stay alert.

Some time later, she and Tyrion were enjoying a strangely uncharacteristic hour of silence when Ser Davos returned, a bloodied and weary looking Jaime Lannister behind him. Tyrion rose immediately from his chair to greet his brother with much relief.

“Is Jon Snow here yet?” Jaime asked them without preamble.

“No,” Daenerys replied with a sinking feeling. “Have you not seen him?”

Jaime shook his head. “Not since the fighting started.”

“So I take it you are not aware of the reason for retreat either?”

“I am not,” Jaime said. “The Hound brought the orders to me and did not elaborate.” He sighed, and sank into a nearby chair with an accompanying clank of metal. “I was hoping you would have answers.”

She swallowed the lump in her throat and tried not to look concerned. “Unfortunately, I do not,” she responded.

Tyrion offered his brother a cup that was likely filled with wine, who took it and drank it gratefully.

“How was the army able to get away?” Tyrion asked him.

“I’m not sure, to be honest,” Jaime said. “I didn’t think we would get away. Dead men were chasing us down the road, and then all of a sudden, they weren’t.” He sighed. “A wave of fire care bursting out of Winterfell and took them all with it...yet all I felt was a warm breeze. It left us and the horses unharmed.” The tone of his voice indicated that he felt himself as delusional as the words sounded, but was unable to come up with a more rational explanation.

Daenerys looked at Ser Davos, who showed no surprise at the tale. “Does that sound like something Melisandre could do?” she asked him.

He shrugged. “Perhaps,” he said quietly. “I’ve seen her do a number of things I didn’t think were possible.”

“Who is Melisandre?” Jaime asked.
“A Red Priestess from Asshai,” Tyrion said. “We think she’s the one who told Jon Snow to abandon Winterfell.”

Jaime frowned. “Jon Snow doesn’t strike me as a believer in the Lord of Light.”

“He’s not,” Ser Davos said, rather sharply. “But that doesn’t mean he didn’t believe her.”

“How many of our forces do you estimate we have left?” Daenerys asked.

There was a pause as Jaime let out a prolonged breath. “It’s hard to say. I don’t know how many are still behind us. I saw Grey Worm on the road and he wasn’t sure of his numbers either. It’s chaos right now.”

She allowed a tiny measure of relief to flow through her at the news of her Unsullied Commander. He had survived. That was good. She didn’t know if she would have had the strength to write Missandei and inform her otherwise.

Daenerys drummed her fingers on the edge of the table before looking up to regard Tyrion and Ser Davos. “If the two of you could find out if anyone else here saw or spoke with Melisandre, please bring them to me,” she said. “Otherwise, there’s not much we can do until Jon arrives.”

The two advisors nodded and took their leave. Jaime stood to follow after them, but he paused at the door, turning to look back at her.

“You’re not who I thought you would be,” he said, a small concession in his voice.

She looked up to meet his eyes. The graying in his beard and the dim lighting of the candles made him look much older than his years. “Neither are you,” she replied. “I suppose you expected my father.”

He returned her gaze with a serious one of his own. The heavy history between them sat in the air like a dark cloud. Jaime Lannister. Kingslayer. Oathbreaker. Names that didn’t match the man that stood before her now. “Yes,” he admitted plainly.

“You are not the only one.”

There was silence between them. It seemed as if he didn’t really know what to say in response. “Your father would not have risked his life for others as you have done,” he said finally. “As strange as it is to say...the North survives because of you.”

“ Barely,” she said, letting frustration get the best of her, just for a moment. “And almost not at all.”

“It could have been worse.”

She regarded him for a long moment. “Do you stand with us still?” she asked, suddenly desperate for the clarification. “Can we still count on you to help?”

“Until the dead are defeated, I am at your service,” Jaime said, with a little nod in her direction. Since his arrival at Winterfell, he had been very careful on how he acknowledged her and Jon; not wanting use of titles to be mistaken for fealty in any form. She respected that, in a way, even though it made his divided loyalties quite clear. Yet it was honest, and she preferred that to the alternative. These were not the times to be engaging in false politics.

So she decided to believe him. “And after that?”
He looked at her seriously, his expression unreadable. “I suppose we’ll deal with that when we have to,” he replied.

The wait was getting to her. She tracked down Ser Davos in the main courtyard of the keep, desperate to occupy her mind with something. The older man was kind enough to keep to her side as they walked past soldiers demanding answers, the cries and screams of the injured, and the fearful, terrified faces of far too many children.

The Dothraki were much the same. She was grateful that Ser Davos did not understand the full Dothraki language and could not hear the extent of what they were shouting. Ser Jorah had worn himself hoarse in an attempt to keep the situation from escalating, but as she approached the makeshift camp outside the walls it was clear he was slowly losing ground with them. It felt like she spoke to them for hours as she tried to convince them that a retreat wasn’t a loss, that there was still fighting to be done. Most were still bloodthirsty, but many were also terrified at the sight of the army that had come for them. She knew that many were on the verge of flight fueled by intense superstition, and once they started to fracture it would not take long for her entire khalasar to disperse into the night.

*Hurry up Jon,* she silently begged. It wasn’t just the Dothraki that were in such moods. The whole castle had the air of despair and defeat and exhaustion. The great keep of Winterfell, bastion of the North, had been leveled to rubble. The sun had somehow failed to rise. Men and women and children that had once been loved ones and friends were now turned into blue-eyed slaves of the enemy.

Daenerys, Davos, and Ser Jorah stood outside the gates for hours still as people began to arrive, each group offering no new information, and only asking more questions she had no answer to.

Then, finally, she saw a few wagons trundling slowly down the road. Each was laden with the wounded. They had not seen Jon either, and worry was nothing but an all-consuming coldness within her. Twenty thousand soldiers so far had been accounted for, and none of them were Jon or Arya.

“I can take a horse and ride down the road,” Jorah offered after the third wagon failed to give her the answer she was hoping for.

Daenerys shook her head. “No,” she said. “He would want us to wait. We don’t know what’s out there. No sense in you getting lost as well.”

The wind blew cold and she pulled her cloak about her neck, fingers entwining into the furs. The sky was dark and churned with angry clouds. No moonlight or starlight shone through. Jorah suddenly stood straighter at her side, and she turned to see his face alert with recognition as he looked down the road.

“I believe that’s Sam Tarly,” he said, pointing towards the wagon that approached.

“And The Hound as well,” Davos added.

Daenerys could see them now, dark shapes that became clearer and clearer to her as they approached the light of Castle Cerwyn. There were no signs of any others behind them.
Their wagon was in bad shape; charred with fire and splintered in places along the side. She could see there were others in the back of it. More injured, she assumed.

Yet, it wasn’t the state of the wagon or thoughts of its contents that made her heart freeze hard in her chest. It was the silence as they approached and the way Sam specifically avoided looking at her, his own face wrought with pain and sorrow though he himself appeared unhurt.

She didn’t ask the question she knew he didn’t want to give the answer to. Instead, she slowly made her way to the back of the wagon, counting each breath, each step, each muted crunch of snow beneath her boots. She couldn’t bear to hear. She wanted these last few moments of denial and hope before her world was ripped away from her.

Before she reached the back, a young bannerman jumped down and turned to assist a younger girl with an injured leg. She waited on the side of the wagon as he helped the girl down and carried her towards the castle. Neither of them looked at her either, though tears streaked down their face. She heard Ser Davos murmur to them, instructing them on where to go. Daenerys could barely understand the words. She placed her hand on the wood beside her and stared down the empty road. Nothing but snow and darkness lay before her.

Then slowly, agonizingly, she stepped around to face the back of the wagon.

It was clear at that moment a sliver of hope was still left before she did so. The violence of it being ripped away was so painful she thought she may bear a physical wound from it as she beheld the sight before her.

Arya’s face greeted hers, a hollow mask that was composed of nothing but grief and emptiness, covered in blood and ash, clear streaks of skin showing through that denoted the path of many tears.

And in her arms, a nightmare.

Daenerys pulled herself up into the back of the wagon, her own tears blurring her vision. She blinked them away as she looked at the still and unmoving body of her husband. The left side of his chest had been torn open; the armor mangled and bent as if he had been merely clad in silk instead of steel. She knelt down at his side, reaching forward with shaking fingers to take one of his hands in hers.

She waited for his fingers to clasp gently around her hand. She waited for him to squeeze them briefly in that way he did so often when they were alone together. A small gesture, a loving gesture, and one she found herself craving with all her heart at that moment. She squeezed his hand tightly and desperately, as if it would remind him what to do, and wished for him to return it.

She let out a choked sob when the hand remained limp and brought the hand to her face, pressing against it in grief. How could she bear this? It felt like the earth would open up and swallow her whole and she would fall forever into the darkness and silence of nothing.

Jorah and Davos came around the back, and she turned ever so slightly to look at them. Both men wore expressions of shock and grief, and Ser Davos was the first to turn away, the pain of grief clear and present on his face. Jorah looked from Jon to her and she saw heartbreak and sympathy in his own eyes. This was not the first husband he had seen her lose.

*Heroes do stupid things and they die.*

Jon could almost be sleeping, she thought. Eyes closed, face calm. How many times had she turned over in their bed to see this same face peacefully beside her? Whatever the number, it was not enough. A lifetime would not have been enough.
The wound he bore was horrific, but she forced herself to look at it. She reached out with shaking fingers, and they came away with blood, still tinged red, still wet. The world had not been without him for long.

She wanted to shake him, to beg him to open his eyes, to rage and scream until the gods heard her wishes and returned him to her.

They’d done it once before. Couldn’t they do it again?

Why did he have to be taken from her now?

“Come back to me,” she pleaded quietly to him, her voice shaking with grief. “Come back.”

I will follow. I love you. Please go.

The skin of his face was cold beneath her fingers and he remained still, unmoving.

The wagon lurched forward slowly but she barely registered it. Jorah and Davos walked behind them as they passed under the gated archway. She was sure that word was spreading now of what the wagon bore, but she had neither the care nor the inclination to acknowledge anything outside the reach of her hands.

Arya was silent and still, and they did not speak.

When they stopped again, she looked up briefly to see that they were in the courtyard. The Hound dismounted and spoke with Ser Davos, and then he appeared at the back of the wagon, face set and brutally dispassionate.

He may have spoken to her or Arya, but the words were just sounds in her ears that her mind could not process. She let the man pull Jon away from them and carry him away, and it was a long moment before she or Arya could bring themselves to move. The dark bloody smear where Jon had lain between them was horrifying and she could not look away. Her mouth was dry and her chest felt like she was being crushed slowly with an invisible fist. There was a roaring in her ears that would not fade.

“Your Grace,” Jorah murmured to her, the only sound that made it through the storm of grief surrounding her. He held out a hand to help her from the wagon. Slowly, she reached out to take it, holding it tightly as if his grasp was an anchor; the only thing preventing her from being swept away entirely.

The wind was bitterly cold. It stung at her face and her ears and her hands. She stepped down from the wagon and her footfalls felt heavy, as if her boots were made of iron.

Daenerys then turned to offer a hand to Arya, who had yet to move.

The younger woman stared at her hand at first, but then slowly moved to take the assistance she offered.

“You’re hurt,” Daenerys murmured quietly, brushing a hand along her shoulder. Arya’s left arm hung limply at her side.

“It’s just sore, is all,” she replied, her voice hoarse and flat. She looked past Daenerys in the direction Jon had been taken.

It was a small alcove off the main courtyard with a stone table in the middle and an archway beyond;
likely the place of a beautiful garden in summer, full of color and life. Now there was only snow and grey and darkness and death.

Footsteps came rushing up on her left, and Tyrion came through the ever-growing crowd, eyes searching for her. She met them, and saw the light of hope leave his eyes as she silently confirmed what he had been told.

Jon Snow was dead.

She was in her room at White Harbor, and someone knocked lightly upon the door. She opened it already knowing who to expect.

Jon leaned against the wall in the hallway, looking casual and relaxed, as if being there outside her room was the most natural thing in the world.

“"I was wondering if you would come at all," she said to him.

“"I promised you I would," he replied.

She gave him a teasing half smile. “And you always keep your promises?”

“I endeavor to, yes.” He looked at her, his eyes and hair darkened in the dim torchlight of the hallway. She couldn’t help but stare. “Are you going to let me in?” He asked, a laugh in his voice as several silent moments passed.

She smiled, and stepped back from the door, her eyes lingering on him as he entered, her heart in her throat as she heard the door latch click softly behind him.

“I like your dress,” he said quietly.

She glanced down at it; dark grey, soft, a bit low cut for winter but she had worn it with deliberate purpose. She didn’t want to be a conqueror when meeting the first of Jon’s people. She wanted to be underestimated at first glance; to counteract the rumors Cersei had been spreading by appearing as the opposite. People were easier to read when they didn’t perceive you as a threat, and once Lord Manderly realized that it wasn’t a Mad Queen landing on his docks, but a young woman of similar age to his granddaughters, well, the man had been much friendlier and that made things easier for all involved.

“Thank you,” she said as Jon stepped forward, feeling his hands slide around her waist. “I thought you might; I felt your eyes on me all through dinner.”

Of course, the dress had been chosen for that deliberate purpose as well.

“Yes, it was quite difficult not to follow you up here directly,” he said. She felt his hands moving up her back, firm, warm and steady.

“If I had it all my way, you would be at my side every night for the rest of our lives,” she whispered, her lips just barely brushing his as she spoke. It was a heavy confession, a first spoken hint that there was something more between them than just an affair. “With no need for such discretion.”

He did not pull away, but held her closer in response. “Good thing we’ve all decided you’re to be in
“charge,” he replied, his voice just as soft, lips brushing against hers as he spoke. “So you can have your way.”

They met in a deep, lingering kiss. She liked the way his hair felt between her fingers. She liked the warmth of his skin pressed against her, and the way he held her close. Then, all too soon, she felt him pull away. He didn’t go far, and didn’t release her, but she was not entirely ready for his lips to leave hers. She made a small noise of disappointment.

He kissed her once more, briefly. “I wanted to say something first,” he murmured. “Before we carry on.”

She raised an eyebrow. “Alright,” she said, indicating for him to continue, and curious as to his purpose.

He paused, looking down at her. She felt his hand brush tenderly along the side of her face. “I wanted to tell you that I love you,” he said seriously. “I have for a while, and I’m certain it’s quite obvious, but…” he trailed off, and she watched as his eyes flicked over her face. “But I thought it important to say the words aloud.”

She felt a warm glow within her. “My heart is yours, Jon Snow,” she whispered before pulling him towards her to kiss again. “And I love you in return.”

Daenerys wiped a tear from her cheek at the memory, and wrapped her arms about herself. She wanted to live in that moment at White Harbor forever.

Already, she missed his voice. The way his Northern accent lingered in certain syllables and skipped over others completely. The way it brought warmth and comfort to her, whether it was firmly addressing his lords or murmuring quietly in her ear.

I will follow. I love you. Please go.

And now she would never hear it again.

The large room was empty but for her, and yet the walls seemed to be pressing in around her. She felt as if she were being slowly crushed from all sides. It hurt to breathe, it hurt to think.

Everything reminded her of him.

Daenerys walked over to the window and looked out into the snowy darkness. There was no moon, no stars, no light at all but for the orange glow of torches along the castle walls. She could feel the chill of the air outside through the thin glass, and it wormed its way into her heart.

Then, as she stood there against the window, a faint, familiar sensation fluttered low and deep within her.

She froze, eyes widening in disbelief, hardly daring to breathe. Her mouth went dry and she thought for a long moment that her heart had stopped beating entirely. She waited, still as a stone, to see if it would occur again.

It did.

A long ago memory surfaced like a rushing wave before her. The Dothraki Sea spread out brightly in her mind, the sun shining in a cloudless sky. The memory was so vivid she could almost feel the
warmth of the summer breeze on her face as she stood in the tall grass, alone. She knew exactly what it was without thinking: this moment was the first time she had felt Rhaego growing inside her. The women of the khalasar had been sure of her condition for some weeks at that point, but this, this was the first time that she had truly known it for herself. The little flutterings had amazed her, and she had kept a comforting hand over herself in wonder and joy. *Hello there, little one,* she had said quietly, smiling from ear to ear.

Those same flutterings were there within her now, completely unmistakeable. Daenerys tried to breathe, focusing deliberately on each inhale and exhale, and grabbed the sill of the window for support.

Suddenly a great number of things from the past few weeks, feelings that she had brushed off as consequences of stress and lingering illness, all came into sharp focus. Now they told her a much different story.

She carried a child.

Jon’s child.

She put her face in her hands and sobbed.

Chapter End Notes

welcome to part two of this story. I've been excited to get to this point for a while. I'm glad you're all still reading, and hopefully you will continue to do so even though Jon got super murdered last chapter and no one enjoyed that except for the evil gremlin that lives in my brain

let me know what you think
Scattered remnants of horrifying dreams plagued Sansa’s thoughts each day as they journeyed from Winterfell, making the two days that had passed seem even longer and more difficult to bear. It was the silence that got to her the most; not just the usual reticence of both Bran and Podrick, but the lack of any sort of sound at all. It was eerie not to hear any birds, or see any flashes of deer bounding away ahead their group. The only noise around them was the clattering of the wagon on the road and the various, muted noise of the horses. The bannermen that accompanied them rode around the wagon itself, eyes on the road and in the woods that they were passing through. They didn’t speak either.

She looked behind her at Bran, who was unnaturally still in his chair. He was positioned so that she could see his face when she turned. His eyes were a ghostly white. Sansa waited, frozen in place and her heart in her throat as her brother came back to himself, a slight furrow developing between his brows.

“What did you see?” she asked him quietly. At her side, Podrick shifted as he drove the wagon, also interested in the answer. He worried for Brienne, she knew. Their years of travel together had made them close, and it was strange to see him without her.

Bran was quiet for a moment. “Nothing,” he said, his tone indicating that he found this to be a surprise. That worried her as well. “I can’t see our home at all.”

She knew he’d had difficulty seeing things north of them once the Wall was breached, but he and Sam had yet to discover the reason for it. The general theory was that the Night King also possessed some sort of power to keep Bran away, but so far it was only guesswork.

“Is it like before?” she asked.

“Yes.”

“How close can you get?”

“Castle Cerwyn,” he replied. “And no farther. The battle has started.”

There was a moment of silence, and she met Podrick’s eyes briefly as worry began to eat away at them all.

“We should start riding through the night,” the squire said to her after a moment. “The quicker we
get to White Harbor and on a ship the better I’ll feel about your safety.”

The next hours were tense and silent. Sansa kept her eyes on the trees around them, unable to shake the feeling that they were being watched. The others seemed to have much the same suspicion, and the bannermen rode closer to the wagon.

Nightfall was darker than usual as thick, angry storm clouds began rolling across the sky. No light from the moon or stars shone through, and the wind began to tear at Sansa’s clothes and hair. She pulled her cloak tight about her.

She turned back to check on her brother, but he was once more in another time and place.

“You have dragonglass, my Lady?” Podrick asked, keeping his tone even, but urgent.

Nervous fear shuddered through her as she fingered the smooth stone in her lap. “Yes,” she replied, trying to remember everything of what little Jon and Arya had been able to teach her.

“Hold it steady, like this,” Jon said, demonstrating how he wanted her to do it. She tried to copy him, and he repositioned her hands slightly as she did so. “Now slash forward like so-” He moved his arm swiftly in a crossways motion.

“And if you want to stab something, you hold it like this,” Arya added, pulling out her own dagger and holding it still for Sansa to copy. She then pretended to stab Jon in the arm to show her the motion, and then flipped it around dramatically back and forth, showing off. Sansa remembered Jon laughing at their sister before knocking the blade from her hand with a flash of his wrist.

She wondered what her brother and sister were doing now. Were they alright? Were they safe?

Would she ever hear from them again?

Podrick urged the wagon a bit faster, and one of the bannermen took his horse just into the trees, a hand upon the hilt of his sword. They had seen something.

For the thousandth time, she wished she had taken the time to learn to fight. The dragonglass was sharp in her hand, and she clutched it hard until it pained her.

Then there was a scream in the darkness; loud, fearful, and cut short.

The horses reacted and the wagon shot off at an ungainly pace. Sansa gripped the seat hard to keep herself from being thrown off, and she turned anxiously for Bran; his eyes were still white. She readjusted herself so that she could reach back to grab tight to his arm in an attempt to keep him in his seat.

There was another noise to the left, and she saw the second bannerman appear through the trees. He was running fast, wide eyed and terrified, and notably without his horse. Then, suddenly, he disappeared with a muffled scream.

Blue eyes glowed in the dark.

Sansa shook Bran as hard as she could manage. “Wake up!” she snapped at him. “Wake up!”

He didn’t respond.

At her side, Podrick hissed in surprise and fear, and Sansa turned back quickly. Ahead of them on the road stood a lone figure: tall, ghostly white, with a long beard and a sinister looking spear. These
eyes, though they were the same blue that marked the eyes of the dead, also held a discerning, intelligent coldness. This was not some mindless dead thing; this was something else. It was one of the Others that Jon had spoken of.

A White Walker.

Her skin crawled.

The horses jerked sharply away in an attempt to flee. The reins were ripped from Podrick’s hands and the wagon flipped. Bran’s arm was wrenched from her grip as they went flying into the snow. She lost her dagger as she hit the ground. Snow was cold in her sleeves and on her neck in and her hair. Her side hurt from the impact, but she tried to rise as best she could.

She could hear Podrick calling for her. As she pulled herself up to her hands and knees, she looked up to see that the squire had recovered quickly, his sword drawn in defense. The dead came for them, and she had nothing.

Her heart beat wildly and she scrambled about for her brother; he was lying in the snow not far from her, his chair a broken mess between them. His eyes were still cloudy, and without his help to support his own weight he was hard to carry. Sansa hooked her arms under Bran’s and dragged him back, attempting to pull him with her to the shelter of the overturned wagon.

Podrick remained between them and the dead, but as he prepared to fight them, a murder of ravens, all cawing loudly and brightly, flew directly between them, swarming about the dead. Podrick staggered back out of the way and turned to her.

“Get back,” he said urgently. “Get underneath the wagon if you-” A wight broke free of the ravens and grabbed at his leg, pulling him down hard. He kicked at it, crushing the exposed bone of its face, but still it kept coming for him. “Get back!” Podrick yelled to her again, and she wrenched her eyes away. She grabbed at Bran again and started to pull him back as the wight screamed and shattered apart, dragonglass jutting out from beneath its jaw.

The ravens were lessening. Sansa could hear shouts of others in the distance, but she couldn’t tell if it was living or dead men through the roaring in her ears.

Podrick whipped his head around as an arrow whizzed by him to bury itself into another wight. The ravens dissipated, and Bran started suddenly in her arms. His eyes were normal again, and he was no longer limp but sharp and alert. He did not seem surprised at finding himself in the snow.

A company of men on horseback ran through the group of dead men, but in the darkness she could not see a sigil or banner. Had Jon sent more men to accompany them? Legs of horses and men and the dead passed her and it was impossible to tell who it was that had come and what was happening.

Someone chopped a wight in half beside them, and she watched in horror as the blue eyes focused on her and Bran. Quickly she pulled him under the overturned wagon and away from it’s grasp as best she could, trying to shield him with her body. She kicked at the dead man as it crawled to them. Incomplete hands clutched impossibly on fistsfuls of stone and rock as it pulled itself towards them, stringy hair still somehow clinging to a head that was mostly bone. Her dragonglass was lost; she had nothing to kill it with.

Then Podrick was there, shoving a dragonglass dagger deep into its skull, and she watched it fall apart into bone and dust. Podrick looked under the wagon and she saw his face was streaked with blood.
“Stay there,” he said to them. “Are you hurt?”

Sansa shook her head frantically, and then all that was visible was Podrick’s boots as he stood guard before them, his cloak whipping hard in the wind. She held her brother tightly, helpless, as Podrick fought to defend them both.

In the end, it took five of the wights to take him down, and she screamed when he fell. Blood stained the snow.

Sansa crawled forward as fast as she could, reaching out for the squire. He was coughing and struggling, and she grabbed at his cloak and tried to pull him under the wagon as well. He was heavy, and her fingers slipped on his armor as she tried to grab a better hold of him.

She barely had the time to do so before crunching of snow to her right began to announce an approach. Sansa looked up in fear, her mouth dry, to see the White Walker staring down at her. Podrick struggled against her grasp and pressed his dragonglass into her hand even as he pushed her roughly away. He staggered to his feet and placed himself resolutely between her and the White Walker, blood dripping into the snow beneath him, his sword held aloft.

But he didn’t have to face it alone; Podrick was soon joined by another man, a living man, and Sansa watched with wide eyes as the two fought against the Other. She saw a glint of the other man’s armor now: a Kraken on leather.

Greyjoy.

It was Theon.

Relief and hope sprang into her chest now as she recognized him. Tears stung her eyes and she thought her heart might beat hard completely out of her chest as she watched them fight together, consumed with fear that a single stroke of the White Walker’s spear would end their lives. A horse galloped fast behind them, spraying her and Bran with snow and dirt.

It wasn’t a long duel, but it seemed an eternity before Theon seized an opening and thrust a long piece of dragonglass into the White Walkers shoulder, just as Podrick fell hard into the snow.

A moment of silence passed, and then the Walker shattered with brilliant force, showering them all with ice and snow.

The fighting stopped, and miraculously the remaining dead began to collapse into piles of incomplete remains.

Sansa rushed to Podrick. He looked at her slowly, staring up at her from his place on the ground. There was a wound to his neck, and blood gushed out of it with every breath he struggled to take. She used one hand to try and stem the bleeding, but it soaked through her gloves almost immediately.

He clutched at her arm tightly. She could feel him shaking against her. “Burn me,” he said, eyes insistent and desperate and serious. “I don’t want to be one of them.”

His blood was warm as it coated her hands. She could smell it in the air. “You’re not going to die, Podrick,” she said, trying to sound confident. “We’ll fix you.” She looked up at Bran, then to Theon, begging silently for help, but she could see the sad truth in their eyes. Her heart broke.

His hands still gripped her tightly. “Promise me,” he urged her desperately. The words were a struggle for him to say. “Promise me.”
Tears in her eyes, Sansa nodded quickly. “Yes, yes I promise,” she said. “I promise.”

The urgency in his demeanor lessened. “I’m sorry I couldn’t get you all the way to Dragonstone,” Podrick said, his voice weak now. His grip on her arm was slackening. “Tell my Lady,” Podrick struggled, blood in his mouth and breath coming in short, ragged gasps. “Tell her—”

Then he stopped struggling and went still, his eyes staring blankly past her.

Sansa had watched her father die. She remembered the sword coming down, glittering in the sunlight. She remembered the sound his head made as it hit the stone steps before them. She remembered the cold hand of despair that overwhelmed her. And finally, she remembered the warmth of the stones as she passed out into oblivion. It was an odd detail to remember, but it stood out the most of everything that day. It wasn’t the way her father appeared when he looked at her the last time. It wasn’t the way the blood sprayed out from where his head used to be, or the sound of Joffrey’s laughter ringing in her ears.

No, she remembered the stones against her cheek, warm from the sun.

With Podrick, she would remember the way his hand gripped her arm. Not the blood on her hands. Not the terror in his eyes. Not the way the edge of his breastplate dug sharply into her leg. She would always remember his hand, and the slow way his fingers loosened and fell away as he died.

It was Theon who helped her to her feet, and she embraced him even as he called out orders to his men in the quiet chaos of the aftermath. It was Theon who helped sit Bran up against a tree as his men tried to right the wagon and Sansa tried to salvage some of their things that scattered about in the snow. And it was Theon again who helped lay Podrick on the pyre they had made, laying him with care next to the four fallen Greyjoys that had been lost as well.

Sansa was content to let him do all of these things, unable to pull herself out of the spiraling thoughts that all landed on Podrick’s dying breath, his face replaced in turn by Jon and Arya and Bran, each one of them staring up at her in death.

Theon came up to them some time later as she and Bran sat quietly in observance of the burning pyre. “I’m afraid Bran’s chair and wagon are beyond what we can repair,” he said regretfully. “But we can hack out a sled for him.” His tone indicated that it was not his first choice, and was sorry for it.

“I’ve traveled in worse ways,” Bran said in his usual monotone. He didn’t break his gaze from the fire.

Theon was silent for a long moment. He struggled with Bran’s presence, the emotional turmoil and guilt shining clear upon his face. Her brother paid him no mind, as if Theon was not someone they had grown up with, but just some stranger he didn’t know.

“What are you both doing out here?” Theon finally asked her, concerned. “And with so few guards?”

“Jon sent us away,” Sansa replied quietly. “The dead have come to Winterfell.”

He looked chagrined. “So soon?”

She looked up at him. “You were coming to help.”

“Yes,” he confirmed. “And I bring news of my uncle; he’s ferried the Golden Company to Westeros on Cersei’s behalf. I’ve come to warn Jon. I’m not sure if my raven was able to get through.”
“No, we’ve received no ravens at all in weeks,” she said. “But Jon knows about the Golden Company.” She swallowed, her throat feeling dry and swollen. “He said you were going to try and save your sister.”

Theon was silent at this. “I failed,” he murmured after awhile. “She’s dead.”

“I’m sorry.”

Theon looked down at the flames. “So am I,” he said quietly, though he was more angry than grief stricken.

Silence fell over them again. “So what are you going to do now?” she asked.

Theon looked at both of them. “Jon would want me to keep you both safe,” he said, tone indicating that he was quite firm in that belief and would not be dissuaded. “You cannot get to White Harbor now; we will take you to Dragonstone another way.”

“No,” Sansa said, staring at the flames. “Take us to Castle Cerwyn. I shouldn’t have let Jon talk me into leaving in the first place.”

It took a day and a night of continuous travel to reach Castle Cerwyn, though that was merely an estimate on her part. When the sun had set before the attack it had not risen again.

Sansa was still trying to come to grips with this fact; half sure that the sunrise should appear at any moment. However, the more time that passed the more she reluctantly gave way to the horrifying possibility that the sun was gone.

She heard a dragon roar in the distance and that’s how she knew they were close. It was high in the air, and faint, but still there. Did that mean the queen was still alive? And Jon and Arya? Or was that a sign that the battle was not yet over, and she only heard the echoes of the great beast over the hills? It was strange to her to realize that the sound no longer caused her anxiety and trepidation, but comfort.

The walls of the keep were brightly lit by torches and braziers, giving the clouds above them a strange orange glow. Smaller fires dotted the darkness all around it. As they approached Sansa began to see Dothraki and Unsullied gathered in disorganized fashion, clearly showing signs of battle. The atmosphere was strained and fearful.

The doors were already opened as they approached and Sansa rode into the main courtyard. There were hundreds of her people there and she cast about frantically for a familiar face. She had no idea what to do or where to go. Were her brother and sister here?

It didn’t take long for an answer. No sooner had she dismounted her horse than a call of her name rang through the crowd, familiar and strained even as it filled her with a most desperate hope.

Arya.

Her sister pushed through the crowd and embraced her fiercely, one arm thrown tight about her. Sansa held her in return, the warmth of grateful relief washing over. She pulled back to smile, but her grin faded immediately. Her sense of relief was instantly gone at the sight of Arya’s face.
A shadow of her sister stood before her now, and Sansa watched as Arya knelt down to embrace Bran beside them. There were dark, angry cuts to the left side of her face; her hair hung loose from its bindings in a limp, disheveled mess, and there was a noticeable grief in her eyes behind the temporary gladness of their reunion. Looking around at those that had gathered around them, Sansa could see that each man, woman, and child held the same tired sadness and despair within their faces.

“What happened?” Sansa asked her, not sure she even wanted to know the answer.

Arya stood. Her eyes flicked once to Theon in a dispassionate sort of glance before turning to face Sansa directly. She kept one hand tight to Bran as she did so, and tears welled in her eyes.

“Our home is gone,” she whispered. “The dead have taken Winterfell.”

The words felt like ice in her heart. “And Jon?” she asked, though she knew the answer already in her heart.

A tear ran down Arya’s face. “The Night King killed him,” she answered, grief and pain shining clear in her face now. “He’s in the garden, just there.”

Sansa didn’t turn in the direction that she pointed. She swallowed a hard lump in her throat and blinked the tears that threatened to swell in her eyes. “I don’t want to see,” she said, shaking her head quickly, trying to recall the memory of him standing in the courtyard, alive and whole, instead.

Though she considered herself quite practiced in grief, the news of Jon hurt worse than she expected it would. She thought it would feel like the others, like the news of Robb or the sight of Rickon, but it was so much worse. She could hardly bear it.

“I would like to see him,” Bran said quietly.

Arya looked down at their younger brother and then to the hackneyed sled he occupied. “We’ll go together,” she whispered. “But what happened to your chair?”

“They were attacked by the dead on the road,” Theon answered. “We did the best we could.”


Arya tore her gaze from Theon and focused on Sansa once more. “Yes,” she replied.

“I’ll take you to her.” Sansa turned to see Ser Davos come through the crowd. He looked as tired and solemn as the rest of them, and nodded a polite, wordless greeting to Theon and Bran. “She will be wanting to know you are here.”

Sansa followed the older man through the crowd, and Theon joined them after instructing his men to help Arya move Bran into the garden. She could hear the pain in his voice too; and she realized that he, too, mourned a brother.

Ser Davos gave her a brief accounting of what happened as they walked into the keep, though he told her that details were sparse and that they were still trying to figure things out. All they knew was that Melisandre convinced Jon to retreat, he fell defending Arya, and that Winterfell was destroyed by some sort of fire that could only harm the dead, which was believed to also be of Melisandre’s doing. It appeared that she, too, was killed at Winterfell, along with Lord Cerwyn, Lady Karstark, Bronze Yohn Royce and all but a handful Knights of the Vale, nearly four thousand Northmen, and just over three thousand Unsullied. The number of Dothraki that had survived was yet to be determined, but it was guessed that nearly half of them were gone as well. Her heart sank with each
accounting. It had been a failure. All of Jon’s planning and efforts, destroyed in a matter of days.

The sound of raised voices echoed down the hall before the three of them reached the door.

“I’ve already explained this; we cannot hold this castle against the dead,” the voice of a frustrated Jaime Lannister carried over them all. “It is too small for our host and too close to Winterfell to do any sort of defensive preparation.”

“The farther south we go, the more land we yield,” someone countered. It sounded like Lord Manderly. “White Harbor can hold them off.”

“And get us trapped against the sea if it does not!” Jaime replied.

“Perhaps we should all go to Dragonstone and wait out the winter from the safety of an island,” someone else suggested. The voice was not familiar.

“We do that and we give the entire country to the Night King,” Daenerys interjected, her voice quiet. “A scenario that Jon was quite against, if you recall.”

Ser Davos pushes open the door and Sansa followed him into the room, which was mostly occupied by a large table covered in maps and candles. The familiar forms of some of her lords stood at one end of it, while Tyrion and Jaime stood at the other. Grey Worm and Jorah Mormont stood in the middle.

Daenerys stood apart from them all, arms crossed and looking into the fire instead of sitting in the conspicuously empty chair at the head of the table. Her shoulders were bowed low with the weight of her grief.

“Apologies for the interruption, your Grace,” Ser Davos said into the silent moment. “But we have some new arrivals.”

Daenerys looked up to see her, and her face went from a pained neutral to shock and surprise. Sansa could see cuts to her face as well, cleaned and cared for but still a bit swollen and angry. They looked at each other for a long moment before Sansa walked forward and embraced her.

The queen returned it without protest or objection.

“I’ve already seen Arya,” Sansa murmured when she pulled away. “She told me what happened.”

*Please don’t say it aloud. I can’t bear to hear it.*

Daenerys seemed to understand. There was a deep, quiet sadness in her eyes. “And Bran?” the queen inquired.

Sansa let out a breath. “He is with her.”

She glanced over at Theon, who stood off to the side. “Your sister?” she inquired.

“Dead, your Grace,” he replied, and did not elaborate.

“I am sorry,” Daenerys murmured with kindness and sincerity.

“I’ve come with three hundred Ironborn and news of my uncle,” Theon continued after a moment. “He reached King’s Landing a month ago. The Golden Company has been sent out across the Reach and the Westerlands.”
Daenerys did not react much more than a breath and a sigh and a clench of her fists. “There’s nothing we can do about that now,” she said, a hard note of regret and anger in her voice. “We need to focus on the fight at hand.”

“We’ll soon be fighting a war on two fronts if Cersei gains enough ground,” Tyrion supplied hesitantly, his gaze lingering on Sansa for a moment. “Or if we venture too far south.”

“Where exactly are we going?” Sansa asked quietly.

“We’ve yet to figure that out with any finality,” Daenerys replied. “But I do think Moat Cailin is the best plan. We should leave soon.”

“There are still people coming in,” Lord Glover interjected. “If we leave, how will they know to follow us? Shouldn’t we stay a bit longer?”

“I want to put as much distance between us and Winterfell as we can, as long as that fire still burns,” Daenerys said. “It’s our only advantage and I don’t want to waste it.” She walked forward to the table and grabbed an unlit candle from the center. “I’m going to take Drogon and scout the road to Winterfell for any others,” she said. “And I will light this candle when I leave. If it burns out before I return, head to Moat Cailin without me.”

There was a heavy silence. “I must protest most strongly,” Tyrion said. “We cannot risk it. We’ve already lost one monarch to this war—”

“I am quite aware,” Daenerys replied, an edge to her voice. “Drogon is faster and safer than a scout on a horse, but if you can find someone else to ride him in my stead I will gladly delegate the task.”

He had no answer to that.

“Very well,” Daenerys continued, taking his silence as acquiescence. “Then we have a plan. See that it is done.”

Some time later, Sansa found herself in the garden alcove where her older brother lay still atop a stone table. At her left, Bran sat in a stiff-backed chair that had been brought for him, his eyes focused on some faraway place. Across the small area, the Hound stood in silent guard. He hadn’t spoken a word to her as she entered Jon’s makeshift tomb, the promise she had asked of him ringing harshly between them.

*Please protect my brother and sister.*

On a hook near the entrance, a lantern held a single candle. It burned bright and lively, unhampered by the wind. Sansa focused on it.

Daenerys had put it there before she left; the symbol for her eventual return. Arya had gone with her, after much arguing between the two of them, but her younger sister was stubborn and eventually the queen relented.

Sansa has been nervous about it at first, and now it has morphed into dread. Daenerys didn’t think her flight would take more than an hour or two for them to return, but the candle was over a quarter burnt through now, which meant that over twice that amount of time had already passed. There was
no sound of Drogon returning, try as Sansa might to hear.

Next to her, Bran stirred. She turned to look at him, an arm looped in his to keep him steady and upright as his eyes faded back to their normal brown.

“Anything?” she asked, earnest hope filling her voice.

Bran shook his head. “I’m sorry,” he said quiet and despondent. “I can’t find them.”

She tried to keep her tears at bay as she looked at the candle again. There was no hope left. Her heart felt like stone in her chest. Would this army survive if Daenerys and Arya did not return? Who would lead them? How could they stay together?

All of the unanswered questions felt like a weight resting heavy upon her shoulders, crushing her into the ground.

She looked to Jon, and wished that he could answer. His body was stiff and still.

“I’m tired of saying goodbye.”

“So am I.”

Grief hit her in a wave then, and she bowed her head as tears finally began to fall. She cried for Jon. She cried for Podrick. She cried for her home and for her people. Wordlessly, Bran reached out to take her hand in comfort. They sat in silence for a long time after, hearing nothing but the wind.

Then, in the quiet of their vigil, Jon took a breath.

It took her a moment to realize what she was seeing, but the reactions of both Bran and the Hound told her that she wasn’t imagining it. Jon took another breath, and then another, gasping for air like he was emerging from a deep pool. She watched, wide-eyed, as he rose from the table in a quick and ungainly motion. The Hound tried to reach him before he fell, but Jon stumbled and collapsed onto all fours upon the ground, chest heaving with great breaths of air.

He spit blood onto the snow and his hair hung in his face. She noted with some strange attention that it had gotten long and unruly; a fact that she’s not noticed before, as he usually kept it bound tight away from his face.

“Sansa,” Bran murmured quietly to her. “Sansa, let go.”

She realized that she was holding Bran’s arm rather tightly, and loosened her grip. The Hound stepped forward to help Jon off the ground, and she watched as her older brother struggled to his feet.

He had been dead.

And now he wasn’t.

She got up off the bench and rushed forward to him, taking his other arm in support. She could see his eyes were wild and bright and still grey beneath the ash and blood and hair. With a quick hand, she brushed his hair away from his face, her heart pounding rapidly.
He focused on her then, and she watched surprise and confusion dawning on his face. “What are you doing here?” he asked her finally, choking out the words in a hoarse struggle to speak.

Jon was heavy against her, and she placed his arm around her shoulder and her hand against his chest to keep him steady. It was strange to touch the hole in his armor even as she felt him breathe and speak. It was still rough and sticky with blood. She watched as he looked around the garden, his eyes focusing on Bran over her shoulder for a moment. He was shaking, and unstable, and she was glad of the Hound’s help to keep him upright.

“Where am I?” Jon asked them desperately. “And where is Arya?”

Chapter End Notes

I don’t think any of you 100% believed he was dead but if you did...surprise! also, RIP Podrick.

let me know what you think.

also also, how long into the new year is it acceptable to leave a Christmas tree up?
asking for a friend who is super lazy and totally not me at all
Jon VII

Chapter Summary

Jon struggles to keep his shit together.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Jon VII

“Maybe you're only needed for this small part of his plan, and nothing else. Maybe he brought you here to die again.”

“What kind of god would do something like that?”

Jon sat in a chair in Castle Cerwyn, slouched, an elbow on the armrest and a hand at his temple, attempting to stem the pain throbbing in his head and his chest. He still heard Arya’s scream in his mind. He still saw the brutal disinterest of the Night King staring down at him. He still felt the coldness of the ice spear as it punched through his armor and his body. He could smell the smoke from the godswood as it burned.

Melisandre’s voice still rang in his ears in a dark chorus, and he couldn’t get it to clear.

He stared at the half-burned candle on the table in front of him with near religious intent. It’s purpose had been explained to him when Sansa and the Hound helped him into this room and he could not tear his eyes away from it. Every moment that passed, every drop of wax that fell, lay heavy in his chest as he waited for his wife and his sister to return.

Hours had passed already since they’d left, and he felt each one like a finger around his throat despite the fact that he’d only been forced to suffer through half of one of those hours. Try as he might, Jon could feel no hint of Rhaegal at all, though he searched desperately for him with all the strength and focus his mind would allow. The lack of dragons roaring in the distance was a noticeable, gaping absence.

Anger and grief swirled about him in a raging storm. He gripped the arm of his chair until his knuckles turned white and his fingers began to throb. He could not calm himself.

He tried to remember what had happened, but all he could see was the Night King. All he could hear was Arya. All he could feel was fear and rage and the pain of loss that threatened to overwhelm him. His home was gone. Countless numbers of his people were dead. A sister, missing. A wife, missing.

A child...missing.
Jon didn’t want to spare another thought to it, but his mind refused to let it go. He couldn’t shake the idea and he cursed Melisandre for suggesting it in the first place. She had seemed so sure, and he couldn’t stop himself from obsessing over it.

Did Daenerys know? He couldn’t guess if she did or not; surely she would have told him, if she did?

He thought he had already mourned the loss of the children he would never have years ago. He’d sworn a vow, after all, knowing full well what it would mean, and still he mourned for it. A life he could have a had.

A life he almost had.

The memory of Drogon crashing into the godswood was burned into his mind. It made him sick to think of it, and the only reason it did not overwhelm him with grief was knowledge that she had escaped. He remembered her screaming for him as he ordered Jorah to take her away. He remembered the pleading tone of her voice as she begged him to come with her.

And she had survived, landing here as he wished, only to be greeted hours later with his death. A horror that he wished with all his heart that he could take back, for her and for Arya.

Another long moment passed as he continued to stare at the flickering candle on the table. Then, with great effort, he stood and pulled his shirt up and over his head. His body protested with great objection, but he muscled his way through and dumped the ruined thing on the floor with his armor.

It had taken use of a hammer and a wedge for the Hound to pry it off him; the metal of his gorget had been rent and torn in such a way that it, too, had left its mark upon his chest. He stared at the bloodied metal. One of the printed direwolves was completely obliterated, the other warped so that it was hardly recognizable.

Yet, here he stood.

A bucket of warm water was in the corner by the hearth. Jon walked over to it, his steps slow and deliberate, to begin the arduous process of trying to clean himself off. It was a monumental task, both a physical and emotional effort, but he managed to at least get the front of himself mostly in order before too long.

A knock on the door signalled his sister’s return.

“Jon, it’s me,” Sansa called quietly through the door. “And Ser Davos as well. May we come in?”

Jon sighed and dropped the bloody rag into the bucket in front of him. “Yes,” he replied finally. His voice was cracked and hoarse.

He didn’t turn towards the door until he heard the soft click of the latch as it closed. His sister stood there, and Ser Davos behind her, clothes in her hands and pain in her eyes. He supposed he still looked appalling. Jon had avoided his reflection in the mirror, afraid to see what faced him there.

He was wholly uncomfortable in his own skin and fought the urge to tell them to leave. He didn’t want to see his lords and Daenerys’ council, which was the task that awaited him next. He didn’t want to deal with the staring and the questions and whatever else that would be asked of him in that other room. All he wanted was to be alone, to stare at the candle on the table until long after it burnt to nothing.

“I’ve brought you some clothes,” Sansa said finally, breaking the silence. Her tone was businesslike now, focused on returning him to a state fit to lead. He did not envy her.
“Thank you,” he said, not really sure what else to say. His mind was a mess.

His sister regarded him with a calculating expression. “I also thought you might want some help,” she continued, walking forward and setting the clothes down on the table. “Considering you cannot reach or see behind you.” The words were spoken in a bolstered neutral tone, but he could see the horror in her eyes.

Jon swallowed to keep the threat of sickness from rising in his throat. The spear went through him again and again, and it was all he could do to merely nod in acceptance of her offer. He sat down at her insistence, and she grabbed a fresh cloth to begin scrubbing gently along his left shoulder. She was more gentle and meticulous than he had been.

Ser Davos pulled a chair around to sit across from him as Sansa worked. His eyes were sympathetic and kind. “I’ve been told Lady Stark has already started catching you up on what you’ve missed,” he said, handing him a mug of warm liquid. “I thought you might like to be prepared for what’s in store for you when you leave this room.”

“A great deal of questions I can’t answer, I expect,” Jon replied quietly, taking a small taste to identify it, and then following it with a larger, eager swallow. It was honeyed mead, warm, and much stronger than ale. He raised the cup a bit in a small gesture of appreciation.

“Aye, your miraculous recovery is certainly chief among them,” Ser Davos acknowledged. “Along with speculation regarding your orders to retreat, and the fact that our armies were able to even do so in the first place.” The older man paused and regarded Jon with serious look. “Was it Melisandre?” he asked directly. He was never one to mince words.

The voice of the red priestess rang in his mind once more. *If you don’t leave now, all of you will die.*

“Yes,” he confirmed with a whisper. “It was her.”

Ser Davos sighed and leaned back in his chair. “It doesn’t appear that she survived.”

Jon took another long drink. “I don’t think she planned to.”

Both men understood the act for what it was: atonement.

There was a long silence as Sansa finished cleaning the wound to his back, the water now lukewarm at best. He felt her fingers graze over it softly. “Does it hurt?” she asked, concerned.

“Not like it should,” he replied. “It burns.” He polished off the rest of the mead and let the warmth of it spread through him. “I don’t suppose there is more of this,” he asked Davos, holding out the empty vessel.

“I’ll see to it, your Grace.”

Sansa’s hand was still on his shoulder. “Perhaps Sam can figure something out for-“ she started.

“It will fade,” Jon said, cutting her off. He stood up to walk over to the table once more. “Just like the others.” The last thing he wanted was Sam examining him at all, and seeing the marks of his assassination. It was a story he did not want to tell.

He rifled through the clothes she had brought, wanting to cover up desperately. In the pile, he found a dark blue woolen shirt that he recognized as his own. He held it in his hands with a question on his lips.
“If you’re wondering where it came from, I found a trunk of things belonging to you and Daenerys,” Sansa said, noting his confused hesitation. “She had packed it and sent it here before the battle.”

Of course she had.

Jon tried not to let emotion get the best of him, but he was failing. He’d not thought to do anything like this, because either they would win, in which case the sending away of personal things would not have been necessary, or they would lose, and it would not matter.

He’d not considered the option of losing and still being alive to suffer the consequences of it.

Despite that, in her own particular brand of optimism, Daenerys had considered it. She’d not even told him about it, already knowing his mind full well and hoping for an alternative outcome anyway.

Davos stood up and clapped him gently on his uninjured shoulder. “Wives do a better job looking after us than we do ourselves,” he said softly.

Jon battled hard with the feelings that swelled up within him. “Aye, I’ll have to thank her when she returns,” he replied, his voice thick. He glanced again to the candle on the table. Both Davos and Sansa followed his gaze, but thankfully neither of them made mention of it. The last thing Jon wanted to hear at that moment was false assurances and platitudes. He looked back to his sister. “The ring?” he asked.

When his armor had been pulled away, a ring had fallen from him as well, the severed silver chain hanging limply about his neck. Sansa had picked it up for him, the white stones stained red, and promised to clean and return it.

“Ser Jorah has it,” she replied softly. “He is finding you a new chain.”

“It’s not damaged…?”

She shook her head. “No,” she replied. “No damage. Cleaned it up good as new.”

He let out a little breath of relief.

“We’ll leave you to dress,” Sansa said after a moment of silence. “Unless…” She trailed off a bit as she looked once more to the wound on his chest.

“Unless what?”

She set her jaw a bit in determination. “Unless it would be better to…sew them closed?” She let the uncertain words hang in the air.

He wondered if it would help at all. It stood to reason that it would; after all, he had healed from a number of minor injuries since his assassination at Castle Black without issue. Yet the knife wounds he suffered still remained red and unpleasant. No one had thought to sew them shut before. Instead, he bore the angry marks as a testament to the fact that he shouldn’t be here.

Now another startling, horrifying scar crossed him from his left shoulder to the center of his chest, nearly the length of his own forearm. Another indication that he did not belong.

“I wouldn’t waste the time and effort,” he said finally.

Sansa clearly wanted to object, but thankfully she decided to keep her opinion to herself. She sighed as he pulled the clean wool shirt over himself, the devastation that marked him now out of sight. He
could almost be himself again, were it not for the darkness inside his mind that threatened to pull him under.

“Is there anything else I can get you?” Sansa asked as she and Ser Davos headed for the door.

“Gather the lords and council,” he said to them, wishing he didn’t have to address them at all. “I will meet with them as soon as I’m...presentable.”

They each nodded in quiet assent, and he was alone once more.

Like the shirt, the dark trousers and boots were also things he recognized as his own clothes. He quickly changed them both with relief; the ruined ones that he had died in discarded without care.

The gambeson and padding Sansa had found was the same dark blue-grey of the one that lay destroyed at his feet, but with no designs or sigils or marks of craftsmanship that his previous one had. The cloak, also unfamiliar, was a faded dark red, and absent of furs. It buckled and gathered over his left shoulder rather than crossing his chest, as was the tendency for the lighter summer cloaks, but this one was thick enough that it would keep him warm and that was really all he cared about.

His vambraces, the only bit of his old armor that survived with any integrity, lay on the table. He buckled them on tightly, ignoring the ash and dust and the scoring of the worn out leather, feeling more secure now with them on and not sure why.

His sword belt lay over a chair, but he didn’t bother with it.

He had no sword for it any longer.

Jon felt the loss of Longclaw with a sharp, painful grief. He could see the handle, bright white and glittering as it reflected the fire all around him, sticking uselessly out of the chest of an unaffected Night King.

The memory made him clench his fist in anger. He’d had him. The fucking monster was on his sword like he’d dreamt of every night since the massacre at Hardhome. The blade had gone straight through where a heart should have been and it had done nothing at all to stop him. Everything they had done was for nothing. Everyone that died in an effort to get him to that moment had died for nothing.

Jon resisted the urge to sweep everything off the table in a fit of frustrated rage; the lantern in the center the only impediment to it. He watched the tiny flame flicker as it came close to the end of its life. With a shuddering breath, he closed his eyes and listened once more for the call of a dragon.

There was only silence.

When he opened his eyes again, he caught sight of his appearance in the mirror. It was as if he looked upon a stranger.

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Sansa was there when he stepped out of the room, waiting to walk with him downstairs.

“I don’t need an escort,” he said, though he was glad of her company.
“I know,” she acknowledged, falling in beside him. “But here I am anyway.”

Their footsteps echoed in the empty stone hallway. “I don’t suppose you have any advice,” he asked as they rounded the corner and made for the staircase, an obstacle he overcame slowly but without assistance. “Regarding what I’m about to walk into.”

She sighed. “If there was a worse case scenario, this would certainly surpass it,” she admitted. “You have a leadership problem, and a morale problem.”

“I guessed as much.”

Sansa stopped them both and turned to face him. “To be perfectly honest, this army his hanging on by a thread,” she warned, seriousness in every part of her face and voice. “Until you got up off that table, this was all on the verge of fracturing irreparably, and everything would have been lost. I don’t know what else we would have done.”

Jon didn’t miss the implication in her voice that she believed Daenerys and Arya would never return. In the back of his mind, he knew it too. The longer they were gone, the less likely it became that he would ever see them again.

He didn’t even know if Daenerys’ armies would follow him without her. What would he do if they didn’t?

Suddenly, Sansa threw her arms about him. “I’m so glad you’re not dead,” she said, her voice colored with tears now as she said the words against his ear.

He embraced her in return, ignoring the pain in his chest. He wanted to respond So am I, because he knew she wanted to hear it, but he couldn’t bring himself to say the words. He didn’t know if they were true.

“If I fall...don’t bring me back.”

Sansa pulled away from him, blinking away unshed tears and pulling herself together. “Solve one problem at a time,” she murmured, and it was unclear whether the words were advice for him or for herself. “We’ll make it.”

The two of them walked the rest of the way in silence.

Ser Jorah stood outside the room, his face shadowed by the torchlight. An angry cut ran across his right eye and it gave him a sinister edge. The knight turned at their approach, and his face at seeing Jon there he held no shock, nor surprise. Jon supposed that he would be hard pressed to be surprised at anything, having spent years following a woman that could ride dragons and walk through fire unharmed.

“It’s good to have you with us again, your Grace,” the man said, bowing his head slightly in acknowledgment of him.

Jon hated the deference, but endured it anyway. He didn’t really know what to do or how to respond.

Thankfully, Jorah didn’t seem to really expect anything from him. “I wanted to return this to you,” he
said, holding out his hand. Her ring sat there in his palm, glinting brightly in the torchlight. It had been cleaned and polished. A new silver chain wound through the band.

“Thank you,” Jon replied, his voice still a bit rough and quiet.

Jorah looked at him for a solid moment before handing the ring to him. He knew exactly what manner of precious thing he held. Jon pulled the chain about his neck and let the ring settle atop his armor.

*Come back, Daenerys.*

“Is everyone inside?” Sansa asked as Jon eyed the door with trepidation.

“All the ones we could find,” Jorah replied.

Jon took a deep breath before pushing the door open and marching forward with deliberate steps. He tried to walk with as much normal purpose and pace as he could muster. Eyes stared at him unabashedly, each member of the group focused on him, the man who rose from death.

A chair sat empty at the head of the long table and he made for it, looking up at those gathered only once he had placed himself there. He did not sit, though he desperately wished to.

About half his northern lords survived, he saw. Lord Glover and Lord Manderly stood at the opposite end, their armor dented and scorched by fire. Lady Mormont was there as well, arm braced and in a sling. He remembered when she had broken it, and was relieved to see she was otherwise unharmed. Lord Umber, young as he was, stood as tall as he could across from her, his forehead and cheek cut across by shallow marks caused by shattering stone, barely one and ten and already two battles behind him.

He knew that Alys Karstark was dead, and Lord Cerwyn. Sansa had told him this.

Jorah had followed him into the room, and made to stand in the middle of the table with Grey Worm and two Dothraki bloodriders. The Dothraki stared at him in a mixture of fear and something akin to reverence. He hated it.

To his left stood Jaime and Tyrion Lannister, varying degrees of disbelief in their faces, and to his right, Sansa took her place beside Ser Davos and...Theon.

His Greyjoy brother gave him nothing but a simple nod of greeting. There was nothing to say.

“If I had an answer to the question I see in all your faces, I would tell you,” Jon said finally, his voice still a bit hoarse and quiet, though it carried across the silent room with ease. “Unfortunately, I do not, nor do we have the time to spend discussing it.” He took a breath. “I know things are not what we planned and hoped for, but there is still work to be done. Millions of people to the south still need our help.”

“Another fight like the one we just had and the North will cease to exist,” Lord Glover said, emotion heavy in his voice. Jon couldn’t tell if it was anger or grief, though in all likelihood it was a combination of the two. He felt it as well. “Why should we die out on their behalf when they did not answer our call for aid?”

“Because that is our only option,” Jon said flatly. “All we can do is fight with what we have.”

“News of Winterfell will travel,” Sansa added. “People will hear of it and come to help-“
“All due respect, but I don’t think they will,” Jaime interjected. “Not if what he says is true.” He pointed to Theon, who turned to face Jon in response.

“Cersei has sent the Golden Company across the Westerlands and the Reach,” Theon said. “If Queen Daenerys had any supporters left in Dorne, they will not be able to get to us.”

“Dorne is but a hair’s breadth from civil war after the death of Doran Martell and of Ellaria Sand,” Jamie said. “They have no leader and will devour each other before winter’s end. I would not look to them for help.”

“What about the Riverlands?” Jorah asked.

Jaime sighed. “I doubt what little you find there will be willing to fight,” he said. “The last war hit them the hardest, and the two great houses that were there are all but extinct.”

“Thanks to you,” Lord Glover pointed out.

“Yes, I took Riverrun,” Jaime acknowledged with a hint of annoyance. “But whatever happened to the Frey’s was not my doing.” He shrugged. “Though I can’t say the world suffers for their loss.”

“A common opinion we all share, I’m sure,” Tyrion said, speaking for the first time. He lingered for a moment more in his thoughts, staring at the map before him. “So what if we take the Riverlands?”

“This is not a conquering army,” Jon said, an edge to his voice. “Taking land gets us nothing against the Night King.”

“True, but Jaime just said the Riverlands is in shambles. We wouldn’t have to really spend effort taking anything. And if we control it...that means Cersei doesn’t.”

“I’m not too concerned with your sister at present.”

“You should be,” Tyrion pressed. “If we are forced far enough south, she’ll be breathing down our necks soon enough. And she’s already made it clear that she is more than willing to leave the fight up here to us.”

A good point that he reluctantly conceded. “Fine,” Jon said, and looked back over to Jaime. “If you have any suggestions on where we should go, I would hear them.”

Jaime looked at the map for a long moment. “I thought about Moat Cailin,” he said. “It’s a good defensive position, and they would not circumvent us.”

Jon could hear the caveat in his voice. “But?” he prodded.

“But while it would be a good choke point to defeat an army of living men, I don’t think it will help us much against the dead. We don’t have superior numbers or the ability to outsmart the enemy, because, as you know, they don’t think like us. There is no strategy to their attacks at all, just brute force. We need walls that can withstand siege, and we need time to prepare them. I'm not sure Moat Cailin can offer what we need.”

“But we had those,” Tyrion pointed out. “Winterfell had two sets of the strongest walls in the North. They fell in a day.”

“Yes, walls that fell to a dragon and giants,” Jaime pointed out. “The dragon threat is gone now, and we’ve figured out what to do with the giants, should more appear. I still think we should act defensively on this. Walls should be our priority.”
“I agree,” Jon said. “Moat Cailin is likely our best option.” He sighed. “We should make for it directly as fast as we can. From there we can decide our next move, if necessary.”

“What about White Harbor?” Lord Manderly asked. “New Castle could withstand siege-“

“The fact that Sansa is here and not in White Harbor now is proof enough that we cannot get there,” Jon said, trying to sound sympathetic but decisive. “It is beyond our reach.”

There was silence. “There is also the issue of the Queen,” Tyrion began. “She said to move south without her, but-“

“But we should do as she commanded,” Jon interrupted firmly. “She gave you that order for a reason.”

“What if the Queen returns and we have already left?” Grey Worm asked. “How will she find us then?”

Jon looked at the commander. “We are a large army, and there is only one way south from here,” he said in response. “It will be a lot easier for her to find us than the other way round.”

“I don’t like it,” Tyrion protested. “Leaving without her. We cannot-“

“I assure you, my Lord, that I like it even less,” Jon snapped. He felt the weight of her ring as if it were a thousand times its weight. “But she would not want us to risk the lives of our entire host on her account. We will honor her command in her absence. Am I clear?”

There was silence. “Perfectly, your Grace,” Tyrion responded finally.

Orders were given to begin the journey south. They raided every possible useful thing they could raid from Castle Cerwyn. Food. Weapons. Furs. Supplies were short. Most would have to walk the distance to Moat Cailin and that would make travel slow, especially in winter and especially under constant darkness. It was not a good situation, even in the best light, because what was the point of surviving Winterfell if only to starve to death on the road? What few ravens there were, they sent to anyone they thought could help. The Eyrie. The Stormlands. Dragonstone. Jon hoped the messages were able to survive the winter storm that seemed to howl over the whole of the north.

One by one, his lords and council departed from the room, and soon he was left with Sansa, Davos and Tyrion. His wife’s Hand seemed nervous, as if he needed to speak with Jon but not sure if he was emotionally prepared for it.

“Speak your mind, Tyrion,” Jon said finally, when the man seemed uncharacteristically at a loss for words.

“I’m just...curious as to your miraculous recovery,” he said finally. “I saw you in the garden. And I heard your sister tell us what happened. No man should have survived something like that.”

“No.”

“And yet here you stand.”

“Aye,” he acknowledged.

“How?” Tyrion asked. “And I don’t mean that to be disrespectful because we are certainly glad that you are returned...” he trailed off. “But people die every day and don’t come back. Why you? Why is it that you can die and then rise again and not others?”
Jon leveled a stare at him. “If you figure that out, let me know,” he said. “Because I ask myself that same question with every breath.”

He was back in the room again; the one that held the lantern. The combined armies, weary and battleworn as they were, had begun the march south. Jon didn’t know why they followed him, but they did. The responsibility was oppressive now that it rested solely on his shoulders. He hated that they were leaving, but knew that it was necessary. Daenerys left an order, and he would obey it, because he would expect the same from her if the situation were reversed. Yet it still felt like he was signing her death sentence, and Arya’s, with his own hand.

“Jon.”

The quiet voice of his sister called him back from his despair. He turned to see her standing in the doorway, alone, her shoulders bowed with the weight of her own grief, dressed for travel. It was almost time for them to go.

They both turned to look at the candle, so small now that the little flickering fire was barely visible.

“How have you spoken with Bran?” he asked her quietly.

She sat in the chair beside him. “Yes,” she answered. “I’m afraid it’s the same answer as before. Nothing.”

Jon had expected to receive the bad news, but it was still painful to hear. He didn’t want to leave. He didn’t want to go south. He wanted to get on his horse and scour the North until he found them. He sighed, and clenched his fist in frustration and anger and grief. “And our forces?”

“Ser Jaime leads them south, as you asked.”

“Any trouble?”

“Not that I can tell, but I will keep watch for it.”

Her ready support, easily given, was a small comfort. He didn’t know what he would do without her. “I’m glad you’re here,” he whispered. Here in this room, in this castle, at the end of the world.

Sansa reached out to take his hand and squeeze it. “I’m glad you’re here too,” she replied.

It was quite dark in the room, as the fire in the hearth was mostly embers. The two of them sat together and did not speak. They watched the candle finally flicker and die.
I wanna take a minute to say thanks to everyone for reading this. I hit 100k words last chapter and that's the most I've ever written for anything. I'm glad that it's turning into something that people enjoy. my goal is to finish this before season 8 begins (even if I'm posting my planned epilogue literally the day of the premiere. wish me luck.)

ps: to everyone keeping track at home, my Christmas tree came down today lol. and to all who answered last chapter's straw poll, my unused and dusty anthropology degree thanks you
Daenerys VIII

Chapter Summary

Daenerys and Arya are lost in the wilderness.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Daenerys VIII

She had departed Castle Cerwyn with the aim of flying low over the Kingsroad to just south of Winterfell, looking both for survivors and for any sign of the dead. Arya had begged to come with her, and, against her better judgment, she had allowed it. Her request to see her home one more time had been an unfair emotional plea and therefore frustratingly unarguable, especially in light of Daenerys’ own insistence to her council that there would be little danger.

They soared low near the ruined castle that once had proud round towers and strong walls. Now, all that remained was fire and rubble. The inferno started by Melisandre still burned brightly, and the dead churned en masse inside the piles of broken stone and spread across the moors to the north, tens of thousands of them still there, lit by the light of the fire before them. Blue eyes tracked them across the sky, but made no move to follow.

The dead still remained, and that was all she needed to know. She steeled her heart against the anger and the grief that warred within her at the sight. It was finally confirmed: they had lost, and the sacrifice had bought them nothing.

As she bid Drogon to bank west and return to Castle Cerwyn, something exploded down below them. It came from near the center of Winterfell, the thundering sound echoing through the darkness even over the sound of the wind that rushed in her ears. She turned quickly to see, and Arya as well, but there was nothing that told her what it could have been. Just fire, and the dead.

The sound, however, had sent Drogon into a mad state. Though she asked him to go south, he ignored her. He flew higher and higher, rushing them into the clouds as fast as he could, the wind biting her face as she tightened her grip on the spines before her. She turned quickly to Arya behind her and yelled for her to hold on.

Drogon flew fast and far. Through the thick clouds she could not determine the direction. He ignored her calls for him to heed her commands and to take them back. She felt nothing but fire in response.

He eventually landed in a forest, after some extended length of time, hitting the ground hard and ungracefully, flattening trees and sending up snow and dirt in a great wave. Fire licked at the edges of his mouth, lighting up the area in brief, orange glimpses.

She turned quickly to Arya and ushered her down as fast and as soon as the dragon would allow. Daenerys could tell that he was angry and afraid, and she wondered what it was that had scared him
so. As he was likely the largest creature living on both continents, his fear of something was not a thing she could readily imagine. Before the battle he had been all rage and vengeance; now it was as if he were a different beast entirely.

They were almost to the ground when he roared once more, loud and piercing, and a movement from him sent both her and Arya to the ground. Daenerys caught herself on her hands and knees, shouting at him as she got to her feet again, the pain from the fall still jarring in her limbs. Her commands for him to be still, to let her back on, to take to the skies again; all of them went unheard. It was like he couldn’t understand her.

He was wild and dangerous.

She cast her eyes about quickly for Arya. The younger woman was pulling herself to her feet, but collapsed back into the snow hard. Daenerys rushed to her.

“I’m fine,” Arya insisted. “It’ll pass, I’m fine.”

“What’s wrong?” Daenerys demanded, grasping her arms and trying to pull her to her feet, but Arya cried out and fell again. She knelt down at her side as Drogon roared. Flame lit up the clearing around them once more, and that’s when Daenerys saw it: a flash of purple bruising at her collar.

Arya tried to keep her away from it, but Daenerys pushed her hands back. Quickly, but carefully, she moved back the furs of Arya’s cloak to see swollen, angry bruising descending across to her shoulder.

“You aren’t fine,” Daenerys said, upset and worried. “You promised me that it was not serious.” That had been another of her more serious objections to Arya coming along. It was clear that her arm had been hurt, but she was masterful at keeping pain from her face and Daenerys, stupidly trusting, had believed her.

Arya shook her head slightly. “It wasn’t that bad,” she protested. She took a shaky, shallow breath. “But the fall just now didn’t help.”

Drogon roared again, expelling more fire. Daenerys helped Arya to her feet, wrapping a hand about her waist and hurrying her to the safety of distant trees.

“What’s wrong with him?” Arya asked her, pain evident in every breath. Daenerys battled equal parts sympathy and anger, not quite sure which emotion would win out.

“I don’t know,” she said in answer, turning back to stare at the dragon. “Stay here.”

Daenerys proceeded forward, calling to him again desperately, but Drogon did not heed her. She tried to reach for him but he turned away. Her heart broke as she begged for him to take them back, but he didn’t. Instead, the dragon let out one last roar into the night and leapt into the air, showering her with ice and snow and bits of the trees that he had crushed beneath him. The force of his wings sent her stumbling backwards.

Her heart was beating fast as the sound of him faded away into the night. She stood in the snow, fists clenched and eyes closed and desperately trying to calm herself. Tears stung at her eyes and she blinked them away. They were lost in the woods, far from their army and far from any place anyone would even think to look for them, and she had no idea where they were or how to get back. Drogon refused to answer her. She could not hear him any longer.

She felt worried and guilty and powerless, and remained standing in the middle of the clearing for a long while. Arya walked up to her, the crunch of her boots in the snow the only sound. “You should
have stayed with your sister,” Daenerys admonished quietly.

Arya was quiet for a moment before replying. “I did.”

It took some doing, but they did eventually get a fire going using the smoldering remains of the trees that surrounded them. The flames that danced before her provided little warmth, but it banished the suffocating darkness of the forest from their immediate area and that gave her some slight comfort.

She and Arya sat against one of the fallen trees to block the wind, shoulder to shoulder. In her hand, she clutched her dragonglass dagger as tight as she could.

Every sound, every flicker of a shadow, sent her heart racing. It was disorienting and terrifying not to have the sun and to have no way to tell the passage of time. Hours, days, it all blurred together in the expansive, tortuous darkness of an unfamiliar forest.

Would she ever see the sun again? Or would her child be born to a world of terror and shadow, condemned to live in fear?

As if in answer, there was a small fluttering within her and she laid a hand across herself in response. She blinked and a single tear ran warm down her face. Would she even live long enough to bring them into the world? All of her plans and campaigns and hopes and dreams for Westeros had failed. She had brought two armies in the hopes of creating a better world, and she’d led them to nothing but ruin and death.

A gust of wind whipped through the trees, shaking snow down from the branches and biting at every instance of bare skin it could find. She pulled her cloak tight about her and tried not to think about Jon.

Arya was alert beside her, but Daenerys could feel that her breaths were labored and uneven. She knew better than to ask after her again, tired of hearing the same lie of *I’m fine* over and over.

The fire crackled in the dark.

There was little time nor willingness to sleep, thought they each managed it a bit as they sat together in silence. Daenerys kept trying to see the stars, but the thick trees and thicker clouds made more than brief glimpses of the sky above impossible. She could no sooner gather her bearings than she could grow wings and take flight herself.

Arya stiffened, not from pain or the cold but from a sudden, intense alertness. “There’s something out there,” she said, her voice low.

Daenerys looked to follow her gaze, but could see nothing and hear nothing besides her own heartbeat loud in her ears.

Then she saw it: a flash of white through the trees like a bright shadow before it emerged into the light of their tiny fire. A large wolf with familiar, intelligent eyes.

Ghost.

Daenerys nearly wept with relief as he loped through the snow towards them. He had followed her
to Castle Cerwyn before the battle, remaining near her as he always did, but the direwolf had disappeared soon after. When she had returned with Jorah there had been no sign of the animal at all.

He seemed unhurt, though his coat was dirty with mud and leaves. His red eyes stared into hers with baleful seriousness as she brushed her hand across the fur of his neck.

Hope began to soothe the edges of her despair.

“I can’t believe he found us,” Arya whispered, shocked, emotion wavering in her voice. She reached out a shaking hand to pet the wolf as well, and he allowed the gesture for only a moment before moving away.

Daenerys watched as Ghost gently grabbed the hem of her cloak and tugged it, a quiet but commanding insistence that she follow. He did it once more when she didn’t move, still shocked at his appearance, and the usually silent animal let out a low whine.

“He wants us to go with him,” Arya said.

Ghost tugged at her cloak again, less gently this time. “Yes, yes, we will follow,” Daenerys assured, blinking back tears. She stood up, and then turned to help Arya to her feet.

Resting and walking and resting and walking became the new routine, and she had no way to tell how much time had passed or even if they were going in the right direction. Ghost seemed to have a place in mind - each time they strayed from his intended path he would loop around to guide them back with silent patience, as if they were errant pups still learning the world. Arya had thought she saw a glimpse of a familiar star, and she hoped it meant that Ghost was guiding them south, but the clouds and the trees kept them from knowing for certain.

It must have been days that passed. Two, perhaps, if she had to guess, based on brief glimpses of the sky above and exhaustion that pulled at every muscle, but perhaps it had only been hours. The darkness concealed all sense of time.

She tried not to think about Jon, but it was impossible.

They made slow, painstaking progress through the trees until she could not carry on any longer without rest. Ghost seemed impatient with this, but he stayed by their side as Daenerys slowly helped Arya to the ground. She was growing increasingly weaker and unable to support herself upright without help. Daenerys had been half-carrying her for the last long, slow bit of their journey, each step and each breath difficult for them both.

She could see the younger woman was too pale, even in the dim light of the waning moon. Daenerys felt the side of her face, sticky with sweat. Her heart began to sink.

“You are feverish,” she told Arya, looking at her with worry and fear.

“I just need to rest is all,” she said, leaning against the tree behind her. “It will pass.”

“I think you need more than rest,” Daenerys said, wringing her hands. “But I’m not sure how to help you.” The words came out in a regretful whisper. Her heart ached.

“I’ve survived worse than this.”

They rested and started again twice more, and when the moon had once more risen again in the sky Daenerys could barely hold Arya up. Ghost darted up ahead of them, scouting through the trees before looping back to make sure they were still going the way he wanted.
She hoped he was leading them towards help, or shelter, or any combination thereof. They needed food, Arya needed more warmth than the tiny fires they had been able to make, and they needed it soon or exposure would kill them both.

When they stopped again, Ghost disappeared only briefly before returning to drop a dead rabbit in her lap. It was small, and thin, but it was something. She attempted the process of skinning it herself, with some help from Arya, and before long the smell of it cooking over the fire was enough to give her some brief measure of hope.

Her mind was a mess. Her legs ached from walking and her arms ached from supporting Arya, who had fallen asleep against the tree with her head on her shoulder. It was fitful rest, and the fire highlighted the pain in her face. The purplish bruising on the side of her neck looked worse in the shadows.

She chewed the last bit of rabbit slowly and deliberately, wishing there was more. Ghost lay on Arya’s other side, his head large enough to lay across both of their laps. Daenerys ran her fingers through the fur on his head with a steady pace.

“You’re going to spoil him,” Jon said, eyes full of teasing laughter as she gave the direwolf part of her dinner, unable to resist the red eyes and the calm, but insistent, request he made as he put his giant head across her lap.

Daenerys looked over at her husband, who sat across from her at the table in their room, pulling a piece of bread off the half-loaf between them.

“He’s big enough to take anything off this table that he wants,” she pointed out. “I’m merely rewarding him for having good manners.”

Jon regarded her with a raised eyebrow. “I suppose,” he said, though he did shoot the wolf a look of mild disapproval.

They had been married only three days, and it surprised her how easy it was to fit into each other’s lives. His room, though not as grand as the Lord’s chambers that Sansa and Arya occupied, was plenty large enough for the both of them. A large bed took up one entire corner of the room, and it was covered in soft, dark furs. Beside it, the hearth was lit; a space generally occupied by Ghost when he wasn’t out roaming the keep and the forest beyond. The table, usually covered in maps and correspondence, had been cleared so that they could enjoy a meal together, alone.

It had been his idea to forgo the usual evening fare in the Great Hall with the others. With the exception of the morning following their wedding - a leisurely time that no one begrudged them - they had been busy still with preparations most days and, sometimes, long into the night.

She felt his eyes on her as she pet the white wolf softly atop the head, sipping her wine absentmindedly as she did so. “What is it?” she asked him, curious at the rapt attention.

“I just like the look of you, is all,” he murmured.

She didn’t realize she had fallen asleep until she was jerking awake, noticeably cold. Ghost was gone. The fire was mostly embers now, telling her that she had been asleep for some time. Arya was still asleep next to her, fitful though it was. Her fever still had not broken.
“Ghost!” she called out in a hoarse whisper, hoping he’d just wandered out of her line of sight. “Ghost, where are you?”

She waited, breathless, for him to heed her call and reappear, but there was no sight nor sound of him.

There was no sound of anything, come to think of it. As she listened, she realized that the sounds of the forest, rare as they were, had now disappeared entirely. Her blood seemed to run cold with fear and her mouth was dry as she stayed as still as she could.

“Arya,” she whispered, placing a hand on her shoulder. She was loathe to wake her, but she didn’t want to leave her like this. “Arya, wake up.”

Grey eyes looked back, reacting immediately to the fear they likely saw in hers. “What is it?” she asked. She sounded dazed, the words slow to come.

“I’m going to go look around,” she replied. “Ghost is off somewhere and I have a bad feeling—”

“We should stick together,” Arya protested.

“You need to stay here, out of sight,” Daenerys disagreed. “I won’t go far.”

Arya did not like the sound of that at all, but she did not protest. There was sweat on her brow and a hard set to her face.

“I will be right back,” Daenerys assured, hoping she sounded strong and confident. She held her dragonglass tightly as she stood and looked around through the darkness of the trees. Moonlight, dim as it was, shone through the branches in sporadic patches. She walked forward, clinging to the safety of the trees, searching the ground for any sign of tracks.

The snow was disturbed around them, but she was not experienced enough to know what it was that she was seeing. It could be Ghost, it could be a deer, or could be the wind that whipped hard through the trees.

Or it could be the dead.

She wondered how far they were from Winterfell. She wondered what the Night King had planned for his armies, if he worked a strategy or if they just plowed forward mindlessly into the wilderness without direction. They had been on the road to White Harbor, far south and east of Winterfell, and they could be just as west of it too.

Her fingers were sore from the tightness of her grip on the dragonglass. She called out for Ghost again, quietly and then a bit louder. There was nothing but silence, until a rustling in the darkness made her freeze in her tracks. She pressed herself up against a tree and tried to keep her breathing steady, praying that it would just be Ghost heeding her call and nothing else.

Then she heard the crunching of even footsteps in the snow. Moonlight shone through the branches in thin beams and she looked around for any sign of what she heard.

To her left, the form of a wolf did appear.

It was smaller than Ghost was, and as it passed through a beam of moonlight she could see the fur was grey and matted. It didn’t look like it saw her there, and she tried to remain as still as she could, not even daring to breathe, hoping it would pass.
Long moments stretched into an eternity as it loped by slowly, facing away from her, but then the wolf turned and glowing blue eyes shone back at her in the dark.

She bolted.

The dim glow of the fire where Arya lay was just barely visible through the trees, and she ran as fast as she could in the opposite direction. The dead wolf snarled and chased after her as she crashed through the forest, stumbling over roots and branches.

She didn’t make it far. The uneven forest floor sent her tripping to the ground, the dragonglass falling loose from her grip. She scrambled for it, but it was invisible in the dark. Daenerys struggled to pull herself up quickly, but as she turned she was met by snarling teeth and evil eyes. She tried to push herself away, backwards and on all fours, but it was not enough.

The animal swiped at her, claws scraping her arm in searing pain, digging deep gouges into her cuirass. She cried out in pain, falling onto her back from the force of it and hitting the snow hard.

The wolf was on her now. She used a forearm to block the oncoming teeth from tearing at her, feeling the bite putting hard pressure on her vambrace, though the steel prevented her arm from being punctured. She kicked at it with all her might, shattering bones with her boots, but it was not deterred. Up close now she could see that the wolf was quite decayed, though it’s pressure on her was still significant and nearly beyond her strength.

Her heart pounded as she fought desperately for her life.

As she struggled in the snow, her other hand landed on smooth dragonglass. She gripped it hard, and with an inhuman cry, she slashed at the dead animal with every ounce of strength she had left.

She could hear shouts and growling, and then a white blur as Ghost pulled the dead thing away from her just as it shattered into nothing but a pile of bone and sinew and matted fur, her dagger buried in the side of its skull.

Daenerys lay there in the snow and did not move, tears escaping down her face as she gasped for breath. Her heart felt erratic and overworked, and she laid a hand across her stomach. She felt the deep grooves in the steel there beneath her fingers and prayed. Her other arm throbbed with pain and she felt a warm wetness gathering and dropping downwards. She didn’t look to see how bad it was.

She was only concerned with one thing and she waited for it in fearful anticipation.

And then, as footsteps began to approach, there was a familiar fluttering inside her. More tears made their way down her face to her ears and hair as she wept silently with fear and relief.

The light of a torch began to intrude into the edges of her vision as Ghost made his way towards her. She tried to rise, fully prepared to tell Arya off for disobeying her command to stay by the fire, when she realized that it wasn’t Arya who had come across her at all, but a man.

“You alright?” he asked warily, looking from her, to Ghost, to the remains of the dead wolf between them. He offered her a hand.

After a brief hesitation she took it, still trying to catch her breath. She leaned against Ghost a bit for support, brushing her fingers along his ears in a gesture that was more for her own comfort than his. The arm that had been slashed throbbed painfully, and she looked down to see her fur-lined shirt and padding was torn in three places, blood welling up and soaking the sleeve. It dropped onto the snow below and onto the direwolf as well, staining them both. She wrapped her hand about the cuts, squeezing tight to apply pressure and ignoring the stinging, bruising pain that came with it. She felt
the stickiness of it all down her arm and fingers.

“Yes,” she said to the man, remembering that he’d asked her a question. The dead wolf still snapped at her in her mind. “I am alright.” Her beating heart pounded mercilessly against her, but it, like the bleeding on her arm, was slowing.

He looked at her for a moment, then to the direwolf, the flickering torch turning the confused crease between his brows into a dark line. “Most people find Ghost to be a bit terrifying,” he said, a half-asked question in his tone. “And he’s not usually one to seek out the company of others.”

His words pulled her up short. “How do you know Ghost?” she asked slowly, staring at the man. She was wondering if she should know him, if he was from Winterfell somehow, but he didn’t seem to recognize her or know her at all.

“That silent food stealer and I are well acquainted,” the man replied, with an air of someone speaking of a well-loved but errant dog. “Everyone in the Night’s Watch knows him.” He gave her a curious but leveled stare. “How you know Ghost is the stranger question.”

Daenerys used her uninjured hand to brush her hair away from her face, the silvers strands loose from their bonds and in an untidy mess. The effort had likely done nothing but leave streaks of blood in her hair, but she didn’t care. “We thought the Night’s Watch was all dead,” she murmured, noticing now that the man was dressed all in black from his cloak to his boots.

The man sighed. “Not for lack of trying,” he said, his tone a bit dry, as if the endless night and the destruction of the world were just another mildly annoying problem on a long list of such that he frequently dealt with. “There’s about twenty of us still alive yet.”

She wished that she could tell Jon that his brothers yet lived. With the knowledge from Bran that Castle Black had been destroyed, and no word at all from them since, their death was the only option that they could assume. He had been devastated, she knew, and he had grieved for them.

“My name is Edd,” the man said after a moment of silence between them. “Edd Tollett. I’m the Lord Commander of the Night’s Watch.” He paused. “What’s left of it anyway.”

She wondered what to say in reply. She recognized the name he gave her from one of the few stories Jon had told of his time at the Wall. Could she also trust him with her name? Could she trust him with Arya, sick as she was? Truthfully, she had no choice. Without their help Arya would die, and eventually so would she.

“How do you have a maester with you?” she asked finally. “There is another. She is injured and ill.”

The Lord Commander was sympathetic, glancing at her injured arm again. “No maester, but we will do the best we can,” he said, and it seemed sincere. “Will you tell me your name?”

She let out a breath. “My name is Daenerys Targaryen,” she said finally. “My companion is Arya Stark. We are trying to get to Moat Cailin.”

His surprise was brief, but he seemed to believe her. “Not...Winterfell?” he asked.

Daenerys ran her fingers through Ghost’s fur again, and wondered if the Lord Commander could see the answer in her face.

“No,” she murmured. “Winterfell is gone.”
Chapter End Notes

So yeah, Edd and the Night's Watch are still around. yay! the next chapter will explain all that (among other things: like, where Gendry is and what he's been up to)

let me know what you think and/or leave Netflix suggestions because I need something new to watch while I do laundry
Gendry I

Chapter Summary

A brief summary of Gendry's journey from Eastwatch-by-the-sea

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Gendry I

Gendry had never seen snow before landing at Eastwatch with the King in the North almost six months ago. Born and raised in King’s Landing, it had never been cold enough for such weather, even in winter. He’d heard people talk about it, of course, but with each story he was less and less inclined to see the stuff in person.

The first glimpse of it at Eastwatch had been beautiful. The sun glinted off it as if the ground were covered in precious metals or gems. The Wall soared above him and he marveled at it.

Now, however, it had all lost its charm. It was nothing more than cold, wet, mush that got everywhere and made your clothes consistently damp. No, as far as he was concerned, snow could fuck right off the edge of a cliff and into the deepest level of the Seven Hells.

“You alright there, lad?”

The voice of Beric Dondarrion cut through his dark mood. He sat beside him at one of the many cook fires that dotted through the immediate vicinity, lighting up the woods with pockets of orange light.

“Just thinking about how I ended up here, is all,” he replied, staring into the fire. It had been a strange series of events that had him trudging through the wilderness of the North, and in the company of a man that had sold him to a witch, no less.

“It could be worse,” Beric said, tearing some bread apart and offering a piece to him. “You could be dead.”

He’d been on the western edge of Eastwatch when the dragon appeared. He’d felt the Wall shudder as it was hit by the blue fire, heard the screech that shattered his ears and sent fear deep into his bones. He had stared, wide-eyed, as Tormund and Beric came barreling down the Wall towards him, shouting at him to run. With his heart pounding in his chest they sprinted down the icy path as the great structure toppled to the ground behind them. The dragon roared and screeched and it was so loud he thought it would be the last thing he would ever hear. The sound of ice shearing away and tumbling downwards would be something he would never be able to forget.

Only ten others made it with them. He could hear the screams of those who didn’t echoing in his nightmares. A chill ran through him that had nothing to do with the cold.
“How much longer are we going to be stuck in this fucking forest?” the gruff voice of Tormund was asking as he walked into the light of the fire, the Lord Commander of the Night’s Watch at his side.

Edd sat down and grabbed some of whatever stew was left in the pot on the fire. “Some time yet,” he replied. “But I’m not an expert on the North.”

Tormund grumbled something under his breath, but he sat down as well.

He and Beric and Tormund had met the Lord Commander at Castle Black, after days of constant running atop the Wall.

“A dragon.” Edd had said, looking at Tormund for a long moment while they stood in a stark-looking room at Castle Black. “A dead dragon.”

“Aye, that’s what I’m telling you,” the Wildling insisted.

“How in the Seven Hells did the Night King get a dragon?”

“He killed one of the ones belonging to Daenerys Targaryen,” Beric supplied. “When we were north of the Wall.”

The Lord Commander seemed to want to ask something else, but thought better of it. “I suppose I’ll ask you why Daenerys Targaryen was north of the Wall with you another time,” he said, exasperated.

“We have to warn Jon,” Tormund urged.

“We’ll send a rider.”

“A rider won’t get there fast enough,” Gendry interrupted. He was exhausted and starving and his legs ached. “Don’t you have ravens?”

Edd regarded him with a raised eyebrow. “Who are you?” he asked, before looking at Tormund. “He doesn’t talk like one of yours.”

“He’s not. Jon Snow brought the kid to Eastwatch to go north with him,” Tormund said.

“My name is Gendry,” he said, exasperated. “I’m from King’s Landing.”

Edd sighed. “Well, Gendry from King’s Landing,” he began. “Our last raven was sent out months ago and it never returned. The weather has made it near impossible for them to fly. A rider is our only option.”

“Lord Commander!” A man came into the small room, a scroll in his hand. “For you.”

He took it quickly, raising an eyebrow. “A raven brought this?” he asked. “After I just told them that ravens couldn’t fly in this weather?”

The man seemed unsure of what to do with Edd’s sarcasm. “Yes, but it’s in bad shape,” he supplied hesitantly. “It likely won’t last the night.”

Edd dismissed the man before unfurling the little scroll and reading it quickly. “Luckily for us, apparently Jon already knows about the Wall,” he said, tossing the paper onto his desk. It landed on the wood and furled back onto itself. “That was a raven from Winterfell.”
Gendry felt some measure of relief, but that same emotion was not present on Edd’s face.

“So we go to Winterfell then,” Tormund said onto the resulting silence. “No point in guarding a Wall with a hole in it.”

“Perhaps,” Edd replied, with the tone of someone about to embark on a chore they loathed to do. “But there is a complication.”

“What kind of...complication?”

“We intercepted a Wildling messenger north of the Wall just this morning,” he said. “Claims to have a hundred people of his clan with him near what’s left of Craster’s keep, with wights picking them off along the way. Asked us to help escort them here.”

“So what are you going to choose, Lord Commander?” Tormund asked.

“I was just trying to decide that for myself when you came down the lift,” Edd replied dryly.

“Jon would be halfway there by now,” the Wildling pointed out.

“Such was my thinking,” he replied. “But doing what Jon Snow would do is a good way to get killed, as I’m sure you well know.” He sighed, and stood up. “Unfortunately for all involved, we only have about six and thirty men here. Numbers that won’t make a difference even if we did manage to get to Winterfell before the dead. Those Wildlings need us more than Jon does and he would want us to help them.”

“What should we do?” Gendry asked, meaning himself and the others from Eastwatch.

“We can’t spare supplies to send you south, so you lot are coming with us,” Edd replied. “And I’m sure I’ll regret that before long.”

Just then, a horn blast echoed around them, loud and ominous. Everyone in the room froze and Gendry looked around in confusion.

“What’s that mean?” he asked.

“Hush, boy,” Tormund said, and walked to the window, his eyes on the sky. Edd made for the door and bolted out of it, calling something out on the way that Gendry couldn’t catch. He felt his heart begin to pound in anticipation, wound tight. The Night’s Watch brothers were shouting to each other in the courtyard below as the horn sounded once more.

“Run,” Tormund said, stepping back from the window. “Run, you fools. He’s here!”

Gendry flew out the door and back down the stairs, the horn sounding a third time as he reached the ground and the screech of a dragon following close behind. The sound made his skin crawl, just as before. Above him, blue fire hit the lift mechanism with brutal force, sending wood and bits of metal exploding outward. Ice fell in huge chunks, punching through the roof of the castle below.

The dragon screeched again, its wings blowing icy air past them in a maelstrom. Blue fire erupted forth, blasting apart the main gate.

A hand grabbed him roughly and pulled him away, practically dragging him forward. “The tunnel,” Tormund said to him. “Go!”

He could see the black brothers rushing towards it, some on horses and some on foot, and he sprinted
towards the mouth of the gate that lead back to beyond the Wall. Pieces of wood and stone peppered
them as another part of the castle was destroyed.

The Wall began to make a horrible shrieking sound as they made it near the end, shuddering and
shaking like it had done at Eastwatch.

“Make for the tree line,” Edd snapped in command as they approached. He was on a horse now,
watching behind them. Gendry glanced over his shoulder to see that there were five men still behind.

The tunnel began to collapse.

His chest burned. His legs were afire. He could hardly breathe, but still he burst out of the tunnel and
into the open air with Tormund slightly ahead of him, and focused solely on the trees.

They were less than a mile away, and yet they seemed to get farther from him with each stride.

He was halfway there when the Wall began to groan louder. Edd passed him on his right, the horse
galloping at full speed, kicking up snow and dirt high into the air.

He fell onto the snow as soon as he reached the shelter of the trees and turned over to look back.
There was no one else behind him and Tormund now. Gendry stared in horror as the Wall crumbled,
shaking the ground beneath them as it crashed downward.

“Get back, lad,” Beric said to him, gesturing for him to get further into the trees. He scrambled
backwards as fast as he could, and through the branches they watched the dragon land atop the
ruined Wall and roar, the sound loud and terrifying. To his left, Edd held his horse steady, staring up
in shock.

It took four days to reach the Wildlings, and five days to escort them back to the trees just beyond the
Wall from Castle Black. Edd had left a handful of men there, to hunt what they could and to see if
there was a way back to the other side, and this was the group that Gendry and Beric has stayed
with.

“We’ve tried everything we could think of,” Gendry explained once Edd had returned with Tormund
and nearly two hundred Wildlings. The Lord Commander was even more dour than he’d been when
he had left, which Gendry hadn’t thought possible. “But the short of it is, going around the long way
will be faster than trying to scale this.”

Edd looked at Tormund. “How did you climb it?” he asked.

Gendry blinked. “You climbed the Wall?” he asked, dumbfounded.

“Aye, more than once,” he said. “But you need rope for that. And pickaxes.”

Edd sighed. “Neither of those we have.”

“Well, not as much as you’d need,” Tormund said. “And I don’t think even a handful of the people
here would be strong enough to make it.”

Edd sighed again. It was a frequent expression for him, Gendry was learning. “Then I guess we’re
going the long way,” he said. “We’ll head west tomorrow; Greyguard tunnel may yet be open.”

As it turned out, Greyguard was destroyed as well.

“Will we have to follow this all the way to the sea?” Gendry asked, staring at the ruined tunnel, and
then back up at the Wall.

“It doesn’t reach the sea on the west end,” Edd replied. “It ends in a long gorge that is just as impassable as the Wall itself.”

“Great.”

Edd didn’t appreciate the sarcasm. “If they wanted travel from the north to be easy, they wouldn’t have built a big fuck-off Wall, would they?” he said, annoyed.

“So what are our options then?”

“We have the Shadow Tower left to go. Jon sent men to repair it when he was Lord Commander, so let’s hope they actually did something useful.”

It took near a fortnight of walking to reach the Shadow Tower due to bad weather and the slower pace of their caravan. This castle, thankfully, had an operational gate through the Wall. The tunnel had collapsed a bit in the middle, but a day or two of digging had them finally back in the North.

Shadow Tower itself was a ruin. There were some signs of repair to the main castle and the lift, but all in all it was not what Castle Black had been by half. They stayed there for two more days, scavenging what little supplies there to be had, and taking the opportunity to sleep somewhat indoors. Gendry was really really starting to hate the snow.

So now, after several more weeks of slow trudging through the northwestern part of the country, winding through foothills and crags and iced-over streams, they had ended up in the Wolfswood. The weather got worse the farther south they went, bitter wind stinging his face. He was grateful for the beard he’d let grow out. Anything to help against the cold.

To make matters even worse than they already were, when the sun set the day they reached the trees it had not risen again.

They huddled together in the camp, torches and fires lit in an effort to banish the unnatural darkness. Several people fled into the night, never to be seen again.

A group of Wildlings spoke together a short distance away, faces highlighted by a torch, voices hushed but clearly strained. Gendry watched them for a while, trying to pick up words of their conversation. The wind and darkness made eavesdropping impossible.

“The darkness makes them nervous,” Tormund said, noticing where his attention had gone.

“It makes all of us nervous,” Gendry replied, then frowned. “Except for Beric, it seems.”

“The Night King comes, and with him he brings the Long Night,” the one-eyed man said. “Just as before. But we have fire on our side to fight the darkness.”

Gendry resisted the urge to roll his eyes. “Spare me the speech on religion, would you?”

Beric shrugged. “The Lord of Light speaks to us in the flames, yes, but that is not to what I referred.”

He was too tired for riddles and decided to let the comment lie.

It was Edd who saw something in the trees, stiffening suddenly, his hand freezing midway from his bowl to his mouth. Gendry looked in the direction of his focus, but saw nothing but trees.
“I saw him too,” Tormund said quietly.

Gendry looked back at the two of them. “Saw who?”

“What’s he doing out here?” Edd murmured to Tormund, not hearing Gendry’s question. “We’re hundreds of miles from Winterfell yet.” He set his bowl down and stood up.

“He’s still wild, despite the company he chooses to keep,” Tormund said. “Jon isn’t the type to keep him locked away.”

“I’m sorry, what are you talking about?” Gendry asked again.

“Ghost,” Tormund replied, standing up as well.

“You saw a...ghost?” He furrowed his brows in confusion.

“Not a ghost, the Ghost,” Edd explained, tone a bit short. “That’s his name. Jon Snow’s direwolf.”

Gendry suddenly remembered a story he’d been told by a brown-haired girl in the Riverlands years ago, about how her brothers and sisters had been given direwolves as pets. She had described each one, their names, what they looked like, how they behaved. He’d forgotten the story until now, buried under a pile of memories he’d tried so hard to repress. Hers had been named Nymeria, he recalled, and he’d been treated to an exaggerated and enthusiastic tale of Nymeria the warrior queen once she realized he’d failed to grasp the significance of the name.

He tried to remember Arya’s face, but it had been so long that his memories of her were blurred and unclear.

He pushed her away again, an aching regret in his chest. Thinking about her only caused him pain.

“You,” Edd said, turning to Gendry and putting an end to his train of thought. “Come with me.” Gendry stood at his command as Edd turned his attention to Beric. “You and Tormund keep an eye on things here,” he instructed.

“And if you don’t return?” Tormund asked.

“Fucking come and find us, obviously.”

Gendry followed Edd towards the edge of their camp. The Lord Commander grabbed one of the torches from where it had been staked into the ground and held it aloft.

“What am I looking for?” Gendry asked. There was nothing but darkness.

“The source of my uneasy feeling,” Edd replied dourly. “And a direwolf.”

They walked outwards in a wide loop, carefully and quietly, until the light of their camp had faded into the night. He much preferred scouting with Edd over Tormund; the red haired Wildling found enjoyment in winding him up, and he had yet to find the strength within himself not to react to it. Edd was mostly silent, speaking only to give him a command or direction with the same mild annoyance that he used to address everyone else.

They were about to turn back when the crackling of underbrush made him freeze in his tracks.

A large wolf emerged into the torchlight, the white fur almost an extension of the snow. Red eyes stared right at him, unblinking. He was huge as well, much larger than Gendry thought a wolf had any right to be; even if it was a legendary one from north of the Wall.
Edd sighed, likely the only person in the world that would relax in the presence of something that could easily eat them if it wanted.

“What are you doing out here?” Edd asked the wolf, though it was more an act of wondering aloud than really expecting the wolf to respond. But, Gendry would not have been surprised if it had.

Ghost walked slowly off to their left, stopping just out of the torchlight and looking back at them. A clear gesture to follow.

“Go on then,” Edd said to the animal, taking steps forward. Gendry followed, and they walked silently through the snow. While the torch gave them the ability to follow his tracks, every once and awhile Ghost would stop and wait for them.

After probably a half hour of walking, Gendry could see the glow of a small fire just ahead. He thought that’s where the wolf was leading them, but the wolf froze instead, looking into the darkness to the west. A low menacing growl rippled from him then, and he stalked off in another direction.

“You go and see what that is,” Edd said to Gendry, pointing at the fire. “I’ll follow him and meet you.”

He nodded in understanding, and they split ways.

The fire was low and untended when he reached it, barely more than embers. Snow around the area had been disturbed, and he could see boot prints and paw prints intermingled. There was no way to tell how many had been there, and as far as he could tell no one was there now.

He knelt down to get a closer look at the tracks in the snow. The boots were small, definitely not a man’s size. The paw prints were sizeable, and he wondered if they belonged to Ghost. They were certainly large enough.

He made to rise to his feet again, but before he could do so the sharp coldness of a knife blade was pressed against his throat, catching him by surprise.

“Where is my sister?” a voice behind him demanded. Young. A woman’s. “What are you doing here?”

Gendry slowly raised his hands to show he held no weapon. “If I told you I was following a direwolf, would you believe me?” he asked quietly, trying to keep his voice steady and calm. The knife pressed against him a bit harder. He tried a different tactic. “Listen, if you let me up we can help you find your sister. I’m not here to hurt you or anything—”

The howl of a wolf echoed through the trees. The knife at his throat disappeared. He stood quickly and looked in the direction of the sound; likely where Edd and Ghost had gone.

The woman with the knife had turned as well, and as she faced away from him he saw that it hadn’t been a knife at his throat at all, but a sword, small and thin. He stared at it in disbelief, but before he could place the niggling sense of recognition that crept into his mind, the woman took a step away from him and crumpled.

He stepped forward to catch her just before she hit the ground, her sword coming loose and dropping from her hand. She struggled against him, though it was a weak effort.

“Hold on a moment, will you? I’m trying to keep you from falling,” he said, helping her back to her feet.
The woman whirled around to face him, and Gendry nearly dropped her in shock. “Seven fucking hells,” he said, the words out of his mouth in a breathless expletive.

Arya.

Her hair was past her shoulders and her face no longer held the roundness of youth, but it was definitely, certainly her. Grey eyes stared at him in confusion and surprise, though recognition seemed to evade her. She was the first to recover, prying herself from his arms and stepping back.

“I don’t need your help,” she snapped. Her voice was different that he remembered; there was a harder edge to it now. He tried to think of something to say, but was distracted as she wavered on her feet a bit. He could see pain in her face now, and hear a hitch in her breath as if standing was taking all of her strength. She was hurt.

“It’s nice to know that you’re still the most stubborn girl I’ve ever met,” he said finally, taking a step towards her. “But perhaps you should sit down, yeah?”

She took a step back in answer, and drew a dagger from behind her back. The blade flashed in the moonlight. “Who are you?” she demanded, eyes flashing.

He held his hands up again. “How many weapons do you have?” he asked incredulously. She remained staring at him with hard eyes, dagger raised upwards.

“Shut up,” she said, breathless. “Shut up.” He noticed that she swayed on her feet, and he stepped forward to catch her before she fell to the snow again.

“You know me,” he murmured to her.

Arya was staring up at him as if she couldn’t believe her own eyes. He wondered, a bit self-consciously, if she would remember him. It had been years, after all, they had been young, and there was no telling what all had happened to her since.

But, then again, he’d known her straight away.

“Gendry?” she whispered finally, a hesitant, hopeful question. She recognized him, but didn’t seem to believe it.

“Yeah,” he said quietly.

He could feel her labored breathing. Up close, the sheen of sweat across her brow was noticeable and concerning. She seemed to be weakening, and he tightened his grip to keep her from sliding downwards.

“I thought you were dead,” she whispered, grief in her voice. “What happened to you?” Hair, long and loose, blew across her face. When she brushed it out of the way in a slow, labored movement, he noticed purplish bruising was visible up the side of her neck above her collar.

“I’ll tell you the story later,” he said. “Now, I’m going to help you to that tree behind you.” He gestured towards it with a nod of his head. “If you don’t mind putting your dagger away, I’d like to not get stabbed.”

She didn’t look away from him, but did as he asked. The scrutiny was getting a bit embarrassing. He picked her up, finding that to be easier and quicker than any other option, and set her upright against the tree closest to the fading fire.
“My sister,” she urged him once he had set her down, one hand gripping tight to his arm. “She said she would be right back.”

“We’ll find her,” Gendry assured, but Arya likely didn’t hear him. Her eyes had closed and her hand had fallen limply away.

He didn’t have much more time to check anything other than to make sure that Arya was still breathing when Ghost reappeared. Edd followed close behind, and, to his surprise, so did Daenerys Targaryen.

He almost didn’t recognize her, so far removed was she from the Queen he had met at Dragonstone. There were cuts to her face and neck. Blood streaked down an arm and through her hair. Deep scratches across a black leather cuirass revealed the glint of steel beneath.

She rushed to Arya’s side, looking her over with shaking hands and worry in her eyes. He stood and walked over to Edd, who looked down at the two women with some indecipherable expression. “It’s Arya Stark,” Gendry said to him.

“I know.”

“She said her sister was out there.”

Edd frowned. “Her sister?”

The queen turned towards them. “She was referring to me.”

Something occurred to Edd then, and Gendry saw a flash of understanding as he looked from Ghost to Arya to the queen once more. “Jon married you.” It wasn’t a question.

The queen paused slightly in the act of brushing Arya’s hair away from her face. “Yes,” she replied, a sad note to her voice that gave Gendry a sinking, awful feeling.

Edd looked at her for a moment, but said nothing in reply. He nudged Gendry in the arm a bit to signal him to step away, and the two of them walked some paces back.

“You recognize her, I assume,” he said, keeping his voice low.

“Yes. Daenerys Targaryen,” Gendry answered.

Edd sighed. “She told me that Winterfell is gone,” he continued. “It fell to the dead, and Jon Snow with it.” There was grief in Edd’s voice as he said the words, but instead of the sadness that the queen’s had contained, there was anger.

Gendry tried to keep the fear of the dead out of his voice. “So what now?” he asked.

“Those two have been stranded out here for days,” Edd replied. “Or whatever it is that passes for days around here with the sun gone. What we need to do is get them back to our camp and try to keep Arya Stark from dying. Once she can travel, we will be making our way to Moat Cailin where, hopefully, the Northern army will be.”
The walk back to the camp was quiet and subdued. Edd lead the way, keeping just ahead, torch still held out high and his black cloak billowing out behind him. The queen walked a few paces back, her own cloak pulled tight about her and her hair blowing loose in the wind. It seemed to glow like moonlight. Ghost stayed by her side as a constant, silent companion, and she held tight to Arya’s sword.

Gendry pulled up the rear of their group, carrying Arya herself. He could feel the heat of her fever through the shoulder of his coat, and she did not wake. He worried for her with every step.

Soon the many fires of their camp began to appear through the trees, and Gendry could see Beric and Tormund standing near the closest one, weapons in hand.

“We were just about to go after you,” Beric said as Edd walked into the light of the fire.

“Ghost sent us on a rescue mission,” Edd replied.

Both men saw the queen emerge from the trees, and Gendry shortly behind, confusion and shock on their faces.

Gendry moved past them all without stopping and headed towards the edge of the clearing where his own bedroll and pack lay in a heap. He was debating how to undo it without setting Arya down, but the queen soon came to his aid.

“Let me help you,” she murmured, and knelt down to undo the leather ties and push it out flat along the ground. He set Arya upon it, and the queen set about unbuckling her cloak to lay it across her.

Gendry saw the scratches on her cuirass had matching ones along her upper arm, the blood still shining and wet. The queen made no note of them, but he was certain they hurt. One vambrace was bent against her arm in several places, and he supposed it was quite likely that pained her too, but all she had eyes for was Arya.

He tried not to look at Arya, unsure with how to deal with being both shocked and relieved to see her, while also dealing with the real possibility that the fever might separate them again. It was a frustratingly powerless feeling.

He stood to leave them be, sure that he was just going to be in the way, but he didn’t quite know what to do with himself. Edd stood with Tormund and Beric, speaking quietly to them, and he knew he didn’t want to hear the news of Jon Snow again.

He wished for a forge. Nothing cleared his head like a few hours of hitting something with a hammer as hard as he could.

He looked down at the queen and Arya once more. “I can fix your vambrace,” he said quietly to her. “I’m not sure about the leather, but I can get the steel back to the right shape.”

Daenerys looked at it for a long moment. “I would be grateful to you,” she murmured. And then, quieter, “Jon had them made for me.”

Gendry knelt down once more and helped her remove it; the buckles were stiff and damaged, and upon closer inspection he could tell what had caused the dents: teeth. The scratches across her arm and cuirass began to make more sense.

He held the vambrace in his hand, turning it over and looking at it with a critical eye. It was expertly made and had done its job well. “I’ll have this back to you as good as new,” he promised her.
surprise midweek update!

this chapter is for all of you wondering where the hell Gendry has been, but especially
to gayeld, who has been patiently asking about him since chapter 15 (yes, I went back
and checked). hopefully it was worth it.

also, I would like to point out that I don't think Gendry was left at Eastwatch in the
show. pretty sure he's on the boat with J + D. But he served my purposes better by
being introduced this way. I was going to put him in the story sooner but changed my
mind at the last moment way back in chapter 4 because juggling so many characters was
overwhelming. I have no idea how GRRM does it.

anyway, let me know what you think. Arya chapter coming up next for the usual
Sunday update
Arya IV

Chapter Summary

Arya recovers and reunites with an old friend.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Arya IV

Her dreams were troubled.

She watched her brother die again, at Winterfell. She felt her throat tear inside her as she screamed for him, and she felt the pain of the spear he suffered as if it had gone through her as well. She the guilt and the pain and the grief all swelled anew as it happened again and again, a tortuous montage of death and anguish.

She saw the fear in Daenerys’ eyes when they were on Drogon, her hair flying back as she turned to tell her to hold on tight. She felt the roughness of dragonscales beneath her hands, saw the blood of the dragon’s injuries still wet and steaming in long, dark, gashes in his side. She remembered how the ground had trembled when he’d fought the dead one, flattening the Godswood beneath them. She remembered the heat of the flames and the way the roars seemed to resonate within her very bones.

She remembered Drogon crashing into the snow, far away to the west, and the despair in the queen’s voice as she called after the dragon that no longer obeyed her wishes, abandoning them in the wilderness.

She dreamed of the walk through the forest, of Daenerys holding her upright, and of Ghost.

And at the end of it all was Gendry, but not the boy that she remembered him to be.

It was all very vivid and terrifying, and when Arya woke up it was like emerging from a dark pool with relief. The clear-headedness was a nice change until pain began to throb in her chest and shoulder. The fever had dulled her senses enough that it had seemed bearable, but now she thought it may be less painful to just remove her arm entirely. After a moment though, the pain lessened to a dull, pulsing ache and she let out a slow breath, watching it fog out into the air above her.

She began to hear voices now as sleep and remnants of fever began to clear. She could not distinguish one from the others, but she was certain that they were male voices. The unexpectedness of it sent Arya immediately on high alert and she tried to rise, but to her frustration she found the process slow and difficult. A grey cloak was draped across her, and it fell to her waist as she sat upright. Her cuirass was gone, her weapons, her sword belt, Needle-

“You lie back down right now,” Daenerys said to her, placing a hand gently on her uninjured
Arya laid back down, but Daenerys did find something to prop her up a bit, so she could at least be a bit upright. “What happened?” she asked, her voice weak and hoarse.

Daenerys looked up and past her, towards the fire. She turned her head to follow, and saw a few men around it some distance away. “Ghost brought us help,” she murmured after a moment. “The Night’s Watch.”

Arya frowned in confusion. “They aren’t dead?”

“No they aren’t, luckily for us,” she replied. “How are you feeling? Can I get you anything?”

She turned back to Daenerys, who was looking over her with concern. “I’m fine,” she said. “Well, fine enough I suppose. I can see and think straight again.”

Daenerys smiled. “I’m glad to hear it. And your shoulder?”

For the first time, she noticed her left arm was bandaged tight across herself. She blinked at it in mild irritation. “Hurts like hell,” she said finally.

“Your collar was broken and your shoulder was dislocated,” Daenerys told her, tone a bit admonishing. “It’s a miracle you could manage anything at all.”

In her mind, the Night King hit her again, and she felt an answering twinge of pain at the memory. She shook her head a bit, as if the action itself would dispel it all. She looked at Daenerys, hoping that focusing on her would keep her mind distracted. “What happened to your arm?” she asked, nodding her head towards the bandage.

“It’s just a scratch,” she demurred. “Rest, please.”

Arya sighed. “I think I’ve had enough rest,” she said. “Don’t suppose you know how long I’ve been out?”

Daenerys seemed to think about it. “It’s hard to say,” she replied. “But a day or so at least. The same stars have come and gone and returned again.”

Ghost loped over to them then, coming from the direction of the fire. He laid his great mass at the queen’s side and put his head in her lap, red eyes asking her for something.

“Oh, alright,” Daenerys said quietly to the wolf, and began petting him softly behind the ears. Arya reached forward to do the same, feeling the thick fur between her fingers, wondering what Nymeria was doing, if she would survive what was coming. She had been much larger than Ghost when she had seen her in the Riverlands, the fully grown leader of her own pack. It gave Arya some comfort to know that she was alive, though she still desperately wished that the direwolf was with her.

But their time for companionship was over, and they had each found others to protect instead.

“Was he real?” Arya asked suddenly. “Gendry?”

Daenerys looked at her with sympathy. “Yes, he’s real,” she said. “When he returns he’ll be glad to know you are better.”
“Where did he go?”

“He’s helping to fix one of the carts,” she replied. “You know him well?”

Arya sighed, and turned back to her. “Yes,” she replied. “We fled King’s Landing together, after my father was murdered. Spent some time in the Riverlands trying not to get caught and killed.” It was a simplified version of a long story that she didn’t feel like telling.

Of course, the queen seemed to understand. “It’s quite a handy thing, to know a smith,” she commented, holding out her forearm. “I thought this had been ruined.”

Arya looked at the vambrace. The leather had seen extensive damage, but the steel that glinted beneath was smooth and like new.

“I don’t suppose that’s related to the scratches on your arm,” she said darkly.

“The armor did its job,” Daenerys said. “I am not seriously hurt. It’s nothing to worry about.” Daenerys sighed. “Now, will you please rest?”

“I’ll try,” Arya protested, even as she realized that she was, in fact, still tired. Her mind longed for the comforting respite that sleep should bring, but she knew it would not be without the vivid nightmares once more. Would she see Robb this time when she closed her eyes? Killing the Frey’s had given her peace, but it had not dispelled the image of what they had done to her brother. That was something that would haunt her for the rest of her life.

And now she would see Jon too.

Daenerys looked at her for a moment, eyes kind, as if she knew her thoughts.

This time her sleep was less troubled, but there was no one at her side the next time she opened her eyes. With a quiet grunt of effort, she pushed herself up into a sitting position with her right hand, and then promptly tried to undo the knot on the sling that bound her left. It was tight, and it had no give even as she worked to loosen it. She looked around for her dagger, or for Needle.

“Oh, no you don’t,” someone said, walking over and stilling her hands. “I turn my back on you for one moment and you’re already trying to get me in trouble?”

At first she thought it was a Wildling man that knelt at her side, based on the grey fur longcoat he wore, but the voice had triggered a memory and she looked up at him in disbelief.

She wondered if she was still dreaming.

He had dark, unkempt hair just like it had been when she saw him last, except now there was the addition of a beard. It made him look years older than he should be. Then again, she wasn’t sure exactly how old he was for certain, as she’d never thought to ask, knowing only that he was older than her by some handful of years.

“Gendry,” she breathed out in surprise. She blinked fast, a storm of latent grief and memory threatening to overwhelm her.

“Yes, it’s me,” he said, releasing her hand and sitting back, apparently satisfied that she would not
mess with the sling.

She grasped for something to say. “You have a beard now,” she said finally, breaking the silence. “You didn’t have a beard before.”

He grinned at her. “Couldn’t grow one before.”

“And you look like a Wildling.” The coat he wore was thick and travel worn, and she could see it was lined with leather and fur. Bone clasps held it shut in the front. The rest of his clothes were black, which was unsurprising considering the company he was now keeping.

“They know how to keep themselves warm,” he pointed out. “Serves me well to follow their lead, I think. The snow has rather lost its charm.”

“It’s not that bad.”

“Says the girl from the North,” he laughed. “King’s Landing doesn’t get snow, you realize.”

The sling was irritating her, and she fidgeted with it once more, frustrated with it. Gendry sighed and pulled her hand away from it again.

“Will you stop that?” he said. “Take it easy, will you?”

“I will if you take this off me,” she countered.

He pretended to consider it. “I don’t think so,” he said. “In fact, I’m considering tying the other as well, to save you from yourself.”

She swiped at him with her good hand and he evaded her easily. “I haven’t seen you in five years and the first thing you do is tease me?” she huffed.

He looked at her for a long moment. “Actually, the first thing I did was keep you from passing out face first into the snow,” he pointed out. “I suppose you don’t remember that we have talked a bit already.”

Arya tried to recall. “No,” she murmured. “I don’t remember much of anything that’s happened since Ghost—” She stopped herself short and looked around. “Where is he? And Daenerys?”

“She’s talking with the Lord Commander,” Gendry said. “Asked me to watch over you until she came back.”

“I don’t need watching over,” Arya protested.

He raised an eyebrow. “Clearly you do. I just caught you trying to tear that sling off,” he pointed out. “I gave up a good shirt for that you know, so you’re gonna deal with it until your shoulder heals.”

“It’s not that bad.”

“You’re a liar.”

There was a long silence between them while she stared at her friend, trying to memorize every aspect of his features. She’d let him fade away in her mind before, and she wasn’t about to make that mistake again. She couldn’t really see it before, but now that she had the chance to really look at him, there he was. Beneath the beard and the years and the strange Wildling clothing, it was her same friend there. Same eyes. Same nose. Same posture. It was a comforting familiarity.
He noticed her watching him and slowly looked up to meet her eyes. “What?” he asked.

“I can see you now, is all,” she murmured. “The Gendry that I used to know.”

He regarded her for a long moment. “I’m still the same person,” he said quietly.

I’m not.

She wondered what he would think of her time in Braavos; about the people that she had killed and the things that she had done. Would he still be her friend if he knew?


Arya tried to push Jon out of her mind. His memory still brought her only pain and sorrow. “I still can’t quite grasp that it happened,” she said in a whisper. “I feel like he’s out there still, and looking for us.”

She could almost feel the coldness of the spear in her hands, horrible and cruel and evil as she tried to pull it out. Her heart ached with guilt; if she had held the gate, he wouldn’t have fallen. If she could have fought better, he wouldn’t have needed to save her.

He wouldn’t have died.

Gendry looked at her with compassion. “I’m sorry,” he said sincerely. “He was a good man, and I liked him.”

The words surprised her. “You knew Jon?” she asked.

“Yeah, I did,” he replied. “Went beyond the Wall with him.” He let out a breath. “Never thought I’d be doing that.”

She swallowed a lump in her throat. Why didn’t Jon say anything to her? “I thought you were dead,” she murmured quietly. “This whole time I thought you were dead.”

“And I, you,” Gendry replied. “I’m glad we were both wrong.”

“Jon could have told you where I was,” she said after a while. “Sansa said she sent him a letter on Dragonstone, to tell him I was home.”

Gendry sighed. “I thought to ask him more than once,” he said. “But I was afraid of the answer.”

She frowned. “Afraid?”

“Yes, afraid,” he repeated, running his hands through his hair to brush it away from his face. He seemed a bit nervous and agitated. “After I got back to King’s Landing, I heard about what happened to your other brother. Robb. I knew you were going to him. I never heard anything of you after that, and I didn’t know if I even wanted to.” He sighed and fidgeted with one of the clasps of his coat.

“Why not?” Her question was a whisper. The whole memory seemed to pain him.

He looked up at her. “I didn’t want to know because as long as didn’t, I could still pretend that you were alive out there, somewhere, and that I would see you again. I didn’t ask anyone about you because I was afraid that they would tell me you were dead, and I wasn’t sure if I could bear to know
for certain.”

There was a moment of stillness and silence between them after he finished speaking, and his words hung heavy in the air. She wanted to get up and throw her arms around him, but was forced to settle for a lesser gesture instead. Arya reached forward and took one of his hands in hers, squeezing it briefly.

“I’m glad we’re together again,” she said.

“So am I,” he replied.

Footsteps announced the return of Daenerys, and, with her, a man dressed all in black.

“Arya, this is the Lord Commander of the Night’s Watch,” Daenerys said in introduction. “Edd Tollett.”

The dour-faced man nodded to her in greeting, and then looked to Gendry. “Tormund needs your help again,” he said to him.

Gendry sighed. “I thought he might,” he said, resigned. He stood to leave.

“Hold on, where are you going?” she asked him. “I’m not done asking you questions.”

“Will you ever be?” Gendry asked, teasing. Then he added, “There’s a long walk ahead of us yet. I’m sure we’ll have plenty of time for the rest.”

She frowned. “You promise?”

“I’m not going anywhere,” he assured, and then she stared after him as he walked off with the Lord Commander.

Daenerys let her do so for a moment before sitting down beside her. “We should be headed off soon,” she said. “I wanted to know how you are feeling.”

“I’m fine,” Arya assured hastily. “I can walk on my own.”

Daenerys pulled off a glove to feel the side of her face for what seemed like the hundredth time, but Arya swiped it away. “You don’t have to be checking on me all the time.”

“You’ve held me out as family,” Daenerys pointed out. “Is caring for one another not what family is supposed to do?”

“Yes, as a sister,” she emphasized. “This isn’t... sistering it’s mothering. And it’s annoying.”

Daenerys looked at her with an amused expression. “I’ve not had a sister before,” she said. “So I will look to you for guidance.” She seemed to consider something for a moment, and then glanced around to see if any others were in earshot. When she turned back to Arya, her eyes were serious. “But, speaking of family, I need to tell you something important. If you can promise to keep it to yourself for now.”

“Yes, of course,” Arya said, furrowing her brows a bit in confusion.

Daenerys took a long breath. “You should know that I have recently discovered that I...carry a child.”

The words were stilted, quiet, and hesitant, yet they held a heavy weight. Arya had no idea what to
say. She felt a mix of emotion at the news; happy and sad and troubled and elated. “Did Jon know?” she asked finally, her voice a whisper.

“No,” she said after a long moment, voice full of sadness and regret. “I didn’t know until...after you brought him to Castle Cerwyn. Had I been paying more attention to myself, perhaps-” she cut herself off, and blinked quickly. “Well, there’s nothing that can be done about that now.”

Arya stepped forward and pulled Daenerys into a one-armed embrace as best she could. It was a first for them, a new sort of bond, and she held her tight. The queen returned it, and Arya could feel the stiffness of metal against her shoulders and a hand that moved to smooth the hair behind her.

As they prepared to leave, she could see Beric Dondarrion standing near the Lord Commander, his eye patch distinct and unforgettable. She tried not to be angry at the sight of him. Gendry had told her that it was in the past, that there were more important things to deal with, but it was harder for her to let it go. He and Thoros had been on her list for selling Gendry, and though she had learned Thoros was killed beyond the Wall, there was still a part of her that was disappointed not to have done it herself.

Gendry wasn’t with her when they finally started south, but he did catch up eventually. The pace was slow, but because of that they were able to walk for longer periods and therefore they still made some good time. The first march was hard on her though, and she almost let Daenerys convince her to ride in the cart for a while.

Almost.

Gendry walked at her side, hovering at first but backing off just a bit once he saw she had a handle on herself. Her head was still a bit fuzzy from the fever, and her shoulder hurt like hell, but overall she was feeling better and more focused than she’d had in days.

“You haven’t told me what happened to you,” she said to Gendry as they walked, slightly apart from everyone else. “After we were separated.”

For a moment there was nothing but the crunch of snow beneath their boots. He sighed. “I’m not sure where to start,” he admitted. “A lot has happened.”

“You can start with why that witch took you.”

Gendry didn’t seem to like the mention of her. “She took me to Stannis Baratheon,” he said quietly. “Because of who my father was.”

She frowned. “I thought you didn’t know who your father was.”

“I didn’t, not then. But the Red Witch knew. And I think your father knew, and that was why he came to see me in my shop.” He sighed. “And why the Gold Cloaks were after me on the road, after we left King’s Landing.”

“Someone important then?” she asked, curious now.

He snorted. “You could say that,” he replied. “My father was Robert Baratheon.”
She blinked in shock. The smith that teased her and protected her and endured the horrors of the road with her was the son of a king?

“So what did Stannis want with you?” she asked, once she got over the initial surprise. “To take you in? Because you’re family?”

Gendry let out a derisive laugh. “Yes, but not because he was feeling kind. His witch wanted my blood for some...weird magic. They kept me locked away, and I’m sure they were going to kill me eventually.”

“How did you escape?”

“Ser Davos,” he said. “He gave me a boat and told me to row to King’s Landing.”

It took her a moment to remember that her brother’s advisor had once advised Stannis Baratheon. She didn’t know how that happened, and now she was regretting that she had never asked. There were so many things she wanted to know about Jon that she had never asked, and now she never could.

“And that’s where you’ve been all this time?” Arya probed, trying to bury her grief and focus on the story Gendry was telling. “All that effort to get away, and you just go back?”

“It was the safest place for me, really. I opened my own shop. Kept my ear to the ground for any news.”

“Who all knows? About your father, I mean.”

Gendry let out a long breath. “Ser Davos knew, obviously. And Jon.” He paused. “I don’t know if the queen does, or if she cares.”

“It’s likely she will not,” Arya replied.

“You’re probably right,” he agreed with a sort of half-shrug, then he chuckled a bit. “A Stark, a Targaryen, and a Baratheon bastard walk through the woods. It sounds like the beginning of a terrible joke.”

She laughed.

Chapter End Notes

so, back to Jon and Co. in the next chapter now that we know Arya and Dany are safe with the Night’s Watch.
let me know what you think.

(unrelated and unasked for personal anecdote: I have a big ass career-defining ginormous job interview coming up in my life so if you guys could send good vibes in a general Texas direction this week that would be neato)
“Have you noticed something different about the King in the North?” Tyrion asked in the not-so-subtle, probing way that meant he had an ulterior motive to the conversation. The two of them sat alone together at a small cookfire, and Jaime had been staring into the flames in silence for the better part of the last hour. He knew he should sleep, but couldn’t quite muster the ability despite the rather grueling march they had just completed. Moat Cailin was only one more long march ahead. A day or two, if there was such a thing as days in this unending darkness.

“I’m not going to claim that I know him well enough to pick up on changes to his personality,” Jaime replied, not really interested in engaging. He preferred the silence; a trait his brother did not share.

“I don’t believe that in the slightest.”

He shrugged. “Believe what you want. I’m being honest.”

Tyrion sighed. “He’s not the man he was before, surely you’ve noticed that at least.”

“I can’t imagine that he would be. He was nearly cut in half.” He’d seen Jon’s body when he was brought in to Castle Cerwyn, torn apart from shoulder to center. A gruesome display. He’d heard the story Arya Stark told about what happened; her flat, emotionless tone telling him more about the horror of it all than her words ever could. He felt sorry for the girl. To witness her father’s beheading and then the death of an older brother in such a way...it was no mystery that she had been such a strange woman as a result.

Another sigh from his brother. “And yet he lives.”

Jaime didn’t want to think too hard about that mystery. In a practical sense, he was grateful for Jon being alive purely for his own convenience; now he would not have to worry too much about the Northern bannermen. He was not at all confident in their loyalties without Jon around to enforce them, and his belief that they would have even followed Daenerys as their Queen in the North was slight, at best.

“I’m not sure what you want from me,” Jaime admitted. “If Jon himself cannot tell you.”

“You speak with him often.”
The remark was pointed, even jealous. He ignored the tone. “Yes, of war,” he replied, a bit annoyed. “We are not exactly in each other’s personal confidence. You could perhaps try your luck with his sister.”

Tyrion sighed, an indication that he had already tried that approach and failed. “I have an uneasy feeling.”

“As do we all.”

“Not about the dead, about Jon. Daenerys was to be queen of Westeros when this was over, but we haven’t seen her in weeks. What if she never returns? Are we supposed to support Jon as king of the Seven Kingdoms just because he married her?”

Jaime was sure the queen and Arya Stark were likely dead, and from the brief conversations he’d had with the man, he was reasonably sure that Jon Snow thought so as well. “I have no comment on your political issue,” he said finally. “Who should or should not be on the Iron Throne is not why I’m here.” He stood and made to walk away. “You do realize how dangerous it is to even think about this conversation? Any hint of any political mischief, whether theory or not, could get us both executed.”

“It’s not treason to have a conversation. Jon Snow is King in the North, and we are not of the North.”

“He is commander of this camp, which currently gives him authority over me,” Jaime pointed out. “And he married your queen, which traditionally would give him authority over you as well. Or are we not going by those rules any longer?”

“Nothing about this is traditional; he’s a bastard. We don’t typically have bastard kings.”

“Well, you’re a dwarf who somehow got enough esteem from Daenerys Targaryen to be named her Hand. Use that clever mind of yours to figure out your own problem.”

There was a brief moment of silence between them. “You’ve gotten grumpy in your old age,” his brother said, a low effort tease meant to smooth over the edges of their argument.

“Yes, well I’m not a fan of starting a war campaign with a loss,” he said.

With that, he walked back through the line of tents and the thousands of cook fires that spread out into the night along the side of the Kingsroad. It was a bit frustrating to him that Tyrion could be thinking of political schemes when there was so much else that was more important. Living long enough to even give a shit about the Iron Throne at all being chief among those problems. The cold and the darkness took its toll on them all, and he would not be surprised if they lost a significant number of fighting men to desertion and disease.

That possibility in particular gave him quite a bit of constant worry, and he found himself stuck thinking about that problem as he walked. He was so wrapped up in the storm of his own thoughts that he didn’t realize he’d come upon Brienne until he’d nearly run into her.

“My apologies,” he said, bowing his head slightly. "I'm afraid I'm a bit preoccupied."

He’d not seen her in some time, being caught up in his own tasks and her still recovering from her injuries. She’d been wounded quite seriously in an action that saved his life, and though he sat with her until it was clear that she would live, he’d now taken, rather shamefully, to avoiding her.

It was out of his own sense of self preservation, really. He need to keep a clear head, and all she did
was confuse him.

“The king wants to speak with you,” she said, her words short and to the point. It was a refreshing change after speaking with Tyrion, who had the tendency to use three times more words than was really necessary.

“I am at his disposal,” Jaime replied, gesturing for her to lead the way. She turned and he fell into step beside her. “You seem to be doing well,” he said to her, after a significant period of silence.

“I am.”

He noted the shortness of her tone. “I was sorry to hear about Podrick.”

There was a long moment where she didn’t speak, and all that could be heard was the crunch of snow beneath them. “So was I,” she replied finally. There was a touch of emotion in her voice.

“How are you doing?”

She sighed. “I’m fine.”

Jaime stopped walking then and she followed suit, turning to look at him with a frown. “Answer me again, and this time without the lie.”

She was quiet for a bit. “His absence is keenly felt,” she replied after a while. “He was a companion and a friend, and I had grown to greatly rely on him.”

He could hear the grief in her words, and he sympathized. “A good argument for appreciating what we have while we have it,” he said. “Too often I find the opposite to be the case.”

Brienne looked at him. And not like women usually looked at him: demurely up through lashes. No, she faced him head on, directly, on equal footing. Her eyes seemed to see straight through into his soul, if such a thing did exist. “Do you speak of your own experience, Ser Jaime, or just from what you’ve noticed in others?”

“Surely you know me well enough to guess that it would be the former and not the latter.”

“Yes, I suppose you would have a decent list of regrets,” she concurred, though not unkindly, and he wondered what she’d put on that list. His children? His loyalty to Cersei? The loss of his hand?

They continued walking through the rows of tents, passing cookfires that had Northmen and Unsullied grouped around them to varying degrees. The Dothraki remained less integrated, partly due to their own nature, but also out of caution. A sickness had torn through their ranks just before the battle, and though it had shown signs of abating, it was prudent for the forces to remain separated for now.

Up ahead, the large command tent lit by torches loomed in the darkness. A couple of Northern bannermen stood outside, nodding to them both in silent greeting as they passed through to the interior.

Jon Snow sat with his brother near the large brazier in the center. A book was in his hands, but he was not reading it. His eyes were fixed on his brother, who, as Jaime approached, was staring straight ahead, eyes white all the way through.

It gave him a weird feeling to see, and he quickly averted his gaze.
Sansa Stark was sitting in another chair, working patiently on the cloth she held in her lap. The
glimmer of a needle flashed in and out of the fabric as it caught the light of the fire between them all.
She was the first to look up, regarding him with a neutral look before folding her work neatly and
standing up. At this angle, in the dim light of the fire, he could see Catelyn Tully staring back at him.

“I’m going to retire,” she murmured to Jon. “Tell Bran goodnight for me, will you?”

Jon nodded in response, and Sansa walked over to him and Brienne. Jaime tilted his head to her
politely, which she returned, and then she left the tent with Brienne, leaving Jaime alone with the two
remaining Stark sons.

“You wanted to see me?” Jaime asked, when Jon remained focused on his brother.

The young Northern king let out a breath and glanced towards him. “Yes, I—
Bran Stark gasped then, blinking, and Jaime looked to see his eyes returned to their normal brown.
Jon set his book down on the side table. “Anything?” he asked the boy, a note of desperation in his
voice.

There was silence and stillness for a long moment, and then Bran shook his head sadly. “No,” he
murmured. “I’m sorry. I’ll keep looking.”

Jon looked crushed, his shoulders bowing in disappointment, but he recovered quickly. “Thank
you,” he said. “I know it’s hard for you.”

Jaime looked at them both. “Do I want to know what’s going on?” he asked, feeling like he was
intruding somehow.

Jon stood up and regarded him fully for the first time since he’d entered the tent. “Bran was looking
for Daenerys and Arya,” he said quietly. Jaime’s further confusion must have shown plainly on his
face, and so he continued. “He can see things in the world. Watch them as if he were present
himself.”

“He can do….what?” Jaime asked, hesitant and unsure of what he heard.

“I can see things that happened in the past. I can see things happening now,” Bran explained. “With
some limitation, I’m discovering.”

Jaime tried to remain unaffected despite the rapid beating of his heart. “Ah,” he said, the word careful
and deliberate.

*Can you see yourself being thrown from a tower?*

“Did you think I let you remain at Winterfell on your word alone?” Jon asked pointedly. “I am not so
trusting as that.” The words sat in the air for a moment as Jaime tried to wrap his mind around the
implications of Bran’s ability and what it could mean. “It was Bran who verified your story and
vouched for your honesty. He is the reason I allowed you into my home and trusted you with its
defense.”

Jaime did not want to ask, but he had to know for sure. “Can you see into your own past?” he asked
the boy.

Bran regarded him with a frustratingly impassive expression. “Did I see what caused my fall, you
mean?” It was a bit rhetorical, and Jaime let the silence between them stand as his answer. Bran
looked away, back into the brazier. “I have little interest in my own life.”

He supposed that if Bran had looked, and if he had known, then Jaime would have lost his head for it upon his arrival at Winterfell. It was a small mercy, but still, the looming threat of it hung over him like a dark shadow. If Bran ever did choose to find out what had transpired…

There was a long silence before Jaime spoke again. “You spoke of limitations,” he probed, wanting to know more, but also wanting to be done with the conversation and out of there as soon as possible.

“I cannot see anything north of Castle Cerwyn,” Bran replied. “Not without great difficulty, and even then it lasts only a moment and no more.”

“So we cannot use this advantage against the dead,” Jaime posited, and correctly, judging from Jon’s expression.

“No,” Jon replied. “But we can use it against your sister, which is partly why I called you here.”

“I’m not here to help you against Cersei,” he said firmly.

“And I’m not asking you to,” Jon clarified, and then his voice shifted tone, just a bit. “In watching her, Bran has discovered other information that you might like to know.”

He felt tense and uneasy. “Other information?”

Jon sighed, and glanced over to his brother again. His expression was unreadable. “It is between the two of you to discuss,” he said, and walked over to exit the tent. “I’ll be returning with Sam in a moment,” he said to his brother as he left, the red cloak swishing lightly behind him.

“You can sit if you want,” Bran said after an awkward silence, gesturing to the chair in front of him. Jaime stared at it, letting another moment go by before sitting in it carefully. “I have news of Cersei that may interest you,” he said, looking at him with eyes that seemed to both be too intense and too curious at the same time. Jaime fought the urge to shrink away from the scrutiny.

“What about her?”

“The child she told you of. It’s a girl; she was born yesterday.”

Jaime blinked. “What?” he repeated, not sure he understood. Cersei had claimed that there was to be another child, yes, but the longer he was away from her the more he had started to believe that she had been lying to him, that it was just another one of her tricks to force him to stay with her. Yet here he’s told that it was real. That she was real. “A girl?” he whispered.

“Yes,” Bran replied. “Born too early, but she survives.”

He felt like someone had punched him clear through his chest. It was hard to breathe. “You are certain?” His voice shook even as he tried to control it.

He thought of a girl with golden hair, laughing in the sunshine. Thoughts and dreams turned to memories as he watched Myrcella grow and play in the Red Keep. He watched her in the quiet, tortured agony of a man who was forced to see his own children grow up with another man’s name.

That laughing girl then turned into a beautiful woman, eyes staring blankly upward and blood running along her face. He felt the clutch of grief as if it had just happened, and he felt the weight of Myrcella in his arms as she died.
Would this child bear the consequences of her parents just as her three older siblings had done?

Was she already marked for death just for being born?

Bran Stark regarded him with a calm, expressionless, neutrality. “I thought you might want to know,” he said quietly.

Jaime swallowed the hard lump in his throat. “Thank you for telling me,” he said, trying to keep his voice even. “I assume you’ve told your brother?”

What would Jon Snow do with such information? he wondered. If they did win against the dead and Jon won against Cersei, would he allow her child to be spared? He didn’t seem the type to murder an innocent, but Jaime had already admitted earlier that he didn’t know the man well. There was obviously some darkness in him, and he wasn’t sure how well Jon kept that contained. Jaime had heard the rumors and he had seen him fight. Jon would be a dangerous man to cross were Ned Stark’s penchant for honor not been so deeply ingrained.

Bran was silent and still for a long moment. “No,” he said finally. “I didn’t.”

Jaime was surprised. “Why?”

“I thought you should know first, as the father,” the boy said. “That would make it your news to share as you wish, would it not?”

Bran Stark, as strange and eerie as he was, dangled before him a hint of personal privacy and dignity without thought or reservation. Jaime was desperate for it.

“I can watch over her if you like,” Bran continued. “When I have the ability.”

Jaime let out a breath. That kindness, too, was unexpected. He felt both gratitude and guilt. “Thank you,” he said in response. “Is there...something that I can do for you in return?”

He expected a decline, but to his surprise it was the opposite. “There is,” Bran said. “I need you to convince Jon to take the army to Harrenhal.”

Jaime looked at him, trying to figure out if it was a joke or not. “Harrenhal?” he asked, surprised.

“Yes, Harrenhal,” he repeated. “He and I need to go to the Isle of Faces. It’s very important.”

He was wary and unsure of this. “It’s too close to King’s Landing. We would likely be inviting attack from both sides.”

“If we go to Harrenhal, the Night King will follow us. He wants to go there as well.”

“And how do you know that?”

Bran stared into the fire again. “Just a feeling.”

Jaime sighed. “You want me to convince your brother to give up the North and the Riverlands to the dead - and put his armies on a month-long march - based on a feeling you have?”

“Yes.” He gave no explanation, and did not seem inclined to speak further.

Jaime stood, letting out a breath. “I’ll see what I can do,” he said finally. “But I don’t know how I can convince him when you, his brother, cannot.”
“You are a military man, Ser Jaime, and he trusts your opinion and your judgement.”

“My opinion would not be to suggest Harrenhal,” he said.

Bran looked up at him. “Then I suppose you’ll just have to trust me.”

Jaime studied the boy for a moment before turning around to take his leave. He didn’t know what to make of this strange conversation and his mind was reeling from it all. He needed fresh air. He needed perspective.

As he reached the tent entrance, Bran called out to stop him. “Was it worth it?” he asked.

Jaime turned to meet his gaze, the boy staring at him with fixed, intense seriousness. He furrowed his brows at the question. “Was what worth it?”

“The things you did for love?”

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Chapter End Notes

you're getting another surprise mid-week update because the next chapter is a multi-POV dealing with Moat Cailin, and this was basically a prequel to all that. It's a bit shorter than my usual updates but I think it works better as a standalone chapter.

if anything, future chapters are going to start increasing in length because I want to finish this before the new season SO BAD and there is still SO MUCH PLOT LEFT TO GO. I need one of those time turners from harry potter.

as always, let me know what you think of the chapter and/or if you have questions about things that are happening. sometimes I forget to be clear enough because this is all in my head
Moat Cailin I

Chapter Summary

The Northern army arrives at Moat Cailin.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Moat Cailin

Jon

They were perhaps an hour from Moat Cailin when he heard him.

Rhaegal.

He jerked abruptly, sitting straight up in his saddle and startling his horse. Sansa looked over at him from his left wearing a concerned expression.

“What is it?” she asked. He barely heard her as he concentrated on the sound of the dragon. Based on the lack of reaction from everyone else, he seemed to be the only one who could.

Jon tried to think of what to tell her. “I thought I heard something,” he said, brushing her off, and tightening his grip around the reins of his horse. “Stay here.” He pulled out of line and directed his horse up the length of the caravan, the lights of torches dotting the night and stretching far into the distance, marking the path of his army of forty thousand.

He didn’t need to look back to know that Sansa had ignored him. Rhaegal roared again, a warmth in his mind that was growing steadily the more he concentrated on it. Jon nudged his horse into a trot, and then into a gallop, speeding past Northmen and Unsullied as they marched down the Kingsroad, and pulling out into the open country.

Sansa directed her horse up alongside him when he stopped at the crest of a hill some time later, looking down onto the dark shadow that was Moat Cailin. “What’s going on?” she asked, her voice a combination of annoyed, concerned, and breathless from the gallop.

Rhaegal answered her for him, roaring again. An orange glow rose in brightness on the far side of the castle, and Jon watched it fade back into the night. “It’s Rhaegal,” he said quietly. “I heard him on the road.”

He could feel her eyes on him as he answered, shrewd and calculating. “You heard him?” she repeated slowly. “From all the way back at the caravan?”

Jon turned to face her, the moonlight highlighting the confused furrow between her brows. “I’ll explain later,” he said quietly. He wanted to send her back, but he was loathe to have her riding alone even for such a short time. He sighed. “I’m going to go see what is going on,” he told her. “If
he’s not safe to be around, then the army should hold back.”

“If he’s not safe to be around, then shouldn’t you be avoiding him as well?” she asked. “You are not Daenerys.”

“No,” he replied quietly. “But Rhaegal won’t harm me.”

“You sound very sure,” she replied, hesitation and doubt clear in her tone.

“I am.” He nudged his horse forward down the path, and, after a moment, Sansa followed.

He had been debating, off and on, about telling Sansa the truth about his parents. He’d almost told her at Winterfell out of a desperate need for her opinion and advice, knowing she would give him straight answers and not waste time sparing his feelings, or hers. Yet, he never quite found the right time. There always seemed to be a reason to put it off, a tiny voice of doubt in the back of his mind that it would not go the way he guessed it would.

The need to tell her was stronger now after the Winterfell battle, after rising from death once again to see her there, and he clung to her like she was a life raft in the ocean. The doubt was gone, and his aversion to the truth had lessened in the aftermath of what had happened. His anger towards Ned Stark still burned, but it was not the fire it was before. It was just a glowing ember now, a sore spot, a pain in his chest that was always there. He felt betrayed, and the fact that the man was not here to answer his questions just made the whole wound fester into darkness inside him.

He’d not spoken to Daenerys about this. She would be sympathetic, he knew, but she wouldn’t understand because she he hadn’t known him. He knew Sansa would.

Moat Cailin was a keep in much disrepair. It had seen a lot of battles, but no Lord had taken residence of it since the last, leaving much of it to abandonment and ruin. Rhaegal roared again, low, almost a whine, and Jon watched fire glow against the towers before him. As they rounded the outside of the castle walls, picking their way through the half frozen ground, Jon could see the dragon had destroyed some of the structure of the wall and part of the keep beyond; stone had fallen down and scattered out over the snow.

His horse bucked nervously beneath him, stamping the ground in fear. He reached forward to soothe the animal, murmuring softly to it. The beast was a Dothraki horse, and so he spoke what little Dothraki he’d learned in an effort to calm it. Jorah had taught him some of the Dothraki commands to keep it in control, but on the road that lesson had morphed into further lessons, and after a fortnight of slowly marching south Jon was starting to get a handle on some basic conversation. Qhono still spoke too fast for him to grasp the entirety of his speech, but between Jon’s stilted Dothraki and the khal’s broken grasp of the Common Tongue, they were usually able to understand each other.

Jon dismounted his horse before they fully pulled around to the broken gap of wall that revealed Rhaegal’s position, tying the reins to a small, dead tree to prevent it from running off should the dragon startle it. Sansa did the same, but he gestured for her to stay back. Thankfully, this time she obeyed. He proceeded forward himself, cautiously, focusing on the warmth of the bond in his mind.

Fire flared again, and he saw blood covering the stone and the ground. Some of it still glistened as if it was freshly shed. He walked slowly into view, staring into the gap in the wall. It’s alright, he thought, trying to assure the great beast that he was safe.

At first, all he could see was the glint of Rhaegal’s eyes in the darkness, but soon he felt the wind
stirring with his movement. The dragon focused on him with intensity and a low growl. He could hear the quiet hiss of scales rubbing together in the dark.

Jon held out his hand. *I'm still here,* he tried to say, climbing forward on the stone, wondering now if his death had broken the small connection they’d been able to establish. He wished he could see.

It seemed that the gods were listening, as then the clouds parted and a sliver of moonlight shone down, bathing everything in a grey dimness. He could see the outline of Rhaegal now, the angle of his folded wings and the gliding of his tail in the stone nest he had created for himself.

He could also tell that there was something else with him. He stepped forward some more, pulling himself up onto the crumbled wall so he could see.

Drogon’s face greeted him then, teeth and scales suddenly appearing as he climbed upwards, startling him enough that he nearly fell back down to the ground. The great black dragon lay there beneath Rhaegal, and the hard, sharp smell of blood greeted him in an overpowering wave. He was still, unnaturally so, and the worried, anxious grief that he’d been feeling for days began to tear at him, the sudden, harsh reality of loss painfully sharp and nearly unbearable.

Drogon was dead, and had been for days.

Rhaegal reacted to his sudden emotion, fire flaring at his mouth again and filling the area briefly with burning orange light. Jon saw Drogon’s body curled in a half circle, wings crumpled and half unfurled. There was a lot of damage to his body and his neck; deep gouges that revealed bone. Dark scales and darker blood coated everything.

The smaller dragon was not in much better shape; though he was alive and he was moving. Jon climbed into the stone rubble, his heart in his throat. He called out for his wife, and he called out for his sister, but he heard nothing in response but the echo of his own voice. The great mass of the dead dragon towered before him, as did Rhaegal, who lay encircled by his brother.

The green dragon brought his head towards Jon, and he reached out his hand in response, letting the animal smell him. He took off his glove to touch the scales of his face, warm and smooth against his fingers.

“Where is your mother?” he asked the dragon quietly, voice breaking.

He got no answer but silence.

Jon looked around the stone nest as best he could, searching, wondering with each broken stone if he would find the bodies of his wife and sister there.

He didn’t, and he didn’t know if that was better or worse; to see them, dead, or to not see them, and suffer the uncertainty. With grief and death weighing him down, Jon climbed back out and over the wall. Sansa was waiting for him, staring up at Rhaegal nervously.

“Drogon is in there with him,” Jon said to her, answering her unspoken question as they locked eyes. “He’s dead.”

He saw her shoulders stiffen as she braced herself for worse news. “Arya?” she asked quietly. “Daenerys?”

Jon let out a breath. “I didn’t see any sign of them,” he said.

Sansa let out a long, shuddering breath. “So what does that mean?” she asked, her voice a whisper.
A silent beat passed between them. “I don’t know,” he replied finally. “I don’t know.” He let out a frustrated growl of anger and grief, fists clenched tight. He felt Rhaegal’s pain answering him in his mind, the low sound rumbling from the darkness of the ruins behind him. He wanted to scream, he wanted to fall to his knees and sob, he wanted to feel a sword in his hand and hack at something until the blade was dull and useless.

Rhaegal let out another low, guttural growl from the darkness.

It wasn’t long until riders from their caravan had tracked them down. Jon had no doubt they’d been followed when he tore away from the group. He and Sansa rode back to meet them halfway about the eastern wall; a group of Northern bannermen led by Lord Glover. Jon immediately sent one back for Jorah Mormont, and to tell Jaime to halt the caravan to the far north side of the castle.

“I need men to search everything from top to bottom,” Jon said to Lord Glover. “Every room, every stone, every corner.” He tried to keep his voice level, but he knew that his anger was getting the best of him. “I want this castle torn apart, do you understand?”

“It will be done, your Grace,” the Lord replied, wheeling his own horse around swiftly and barking orders to the men with him.

Sansa remained silent at his side. “We should send someone to tell Bran as well,” she murmured.

Jon saw a bird fly behind her her, glittering black in the moonlight. “I think he already knows,” he whispered.

Sansa

True to his word, Jon nearly had the entire castle disassembled in the search for Arya and Daenerys. She could see the grief weighing on him with each report of Nothing yet, your Grace, and she felt it weighing her down as well. They had both joined in the search, calling out for their family as they walked through halls and opened doors only to be greeted with silence and darkness.

There was no sign or hint that anyone had been here at all; no footprints, no fire, no bodies.

Bran had searched for them and found nothing; learning only that Drogon had arrived here several days ago, without any riders, and shortly thereafter had succumbed finally to the wounds he bore at Winterfell. Rhaegal had been here already, though it seemed he would likely recover from his own injuries.

So of course there was a reason they had found no trace of Arya and Daenerys - they never made it here.

Hours later, she stood in what had once been a great hall. Fires had been lit to ward off the night, and one table had been righted and repaired to serve as a gathering place for her brother’s council.

The remaining Northern lords stood along one side of a table. On the other, Tyrion, Grey Worm,
Jorah Mormont and some Dothraki waited in silence. Jaime Lannister stood one the end, facing down the table between them all, and Jon stood at the other, focused intently on the map before him. His hands were placed on either side of the parchment, his shoulders bowed and his cloak falling forward around him.

“It seems we have a decision to make,” Jon said, breaking the tense quiet of the room. Though his voice was low, it could be heard clearly through the entire room. “Make another stand here at Moat Cailin, or retreat further south.”

No one seemed inclined to give an opinion, waiting instead to see if Jon would speak further to his mind. He didn’t.

“I still think we should move to hold the Riverlands,” Tyrion said after a while. Sansa noted an edge to his voice, a tense note that she attributed to the loss he was most certainly feeling. She knew he didn’t want Jon as king without Daenerys. It was obvious to her and it was likely obvious to Jon. He still wore his Hand, and still claimed to speak on behalf of Daenerys Targaryen, but Sansa could tell that he was nervous about his position now and that made him unpredictable. She did not like unpredictability.

Jon stared at him with a frown. “With what castle?” he asked, frustrated. “The Twins is ill-suited and Riverrun is too far west. Anything else would be too small.”

“We can make do with what we have avail-“

“What we have is Moat Cailin,” Jon interrupted, his tone short.

There was a long silence as Tyrion appeared to grapple with another way to support his argument, but to her surprise it was Jaime, and not Tyrion, who spoke.

“There is also Harrenhal,” the older Lannister suggested, his voice level and carefully measured.

Tyrion seemed to dismiss the idea almost immediately. “Harrenhal a ruin,” he said, a note of confusion and annoyance in his voice.

“Moat Cailin is a ruin,” Jon pointed out, before looking down the table to regard Jaime with intense scrutiny. “Harrenhal is far to the south yet,” her brother pressed, clearly wanting further explanation as to his reasons. “What makes that more advantageous than where we are?”

“Harrenhal keep may be a ruin, but the walls are sound,” Jaime said. “Which is not something we can currently say for Moat Cailin. The swamps that make this castle a good choke point are mostly frozen over and will not deter the dead. We need something that will stand well against the waves of siege, which this will not. Even if we can repair the damage to the southern part of the wall in time, we will likely be surrounded and crushed.”

Jon stared at him, as if trying to gauge if he were serious. “Harrenhal is too far south,” he said finally, sighing. “And too close to King’s Landing. I don’t want to fight a war on two fronts.”

“You’ll likely be doing that anyway, and if you hold that castle, you hold the Riverlands,” Jamie continued. “As Tyrion suggests. It’s a key defense.”

“If that’s the case, then why doesn’t Cersei hold it?”

Jaime shrugged. “Likely for the same reason my brother dismissed it just now,” he said. “It’s a ruin. Holding that castle would cost her more than she thinks it’s worth. She will be concentrating her time and effort on occupied castles; castles that contain lords that will swear their fealty and lands to her.
Harrenhal will not be high on her list of priorities."

Sansa agreed with him, and that was rather surprising. She half expected Jaime to do all he could to keep them out of a conflict with Cersei, either in an effort to spare his sister from the death she deserved or to keep from having to choose a side as long as possible. She was worried that he would stoop to giving Jon advice with ulterior motive, especially now that Jon was beginning to heavily rely on his council.

“And do you agree?” Jon asked him after a while. “That we should hold the Riverlands?”

Jamie sighed. “Not for the same reasons as my brother,” he said. “Because you’re right, we cannot afford to waste our resources taking lands from Cersei.”

“Then why?”

“Because the farther south we go, the more common folk we can warn,” he said. “If we press south, we will be able to tell others to head south as well. It may turn less into ceding land to the Night King and more into sheltering the people behind us.”

“Are we not sheltering them behind us now?” Jon countered.

“The difference here is that no one south of this point believes you. They won’t run from rumors of the dead. They won’t leave their homes on the basis of a tale they were told as children. But when they see an army walking through their roads and fields and towns, they will believe. And they will flee.”

Sansa wasn’t sure if she was convinced Jaime entirely believed his own reasoning, but she knew that Jon would take it at face value. Some of the other men around the table wore expressions that showed Jon also wasn’t the only one to do so. Stranger still, however, was Tyrion’s slight frown as he listened to Jaime speak. Though his brother was arguing in favor of his own suggestion, he seemed surprised and confused by it. After a moment, though, Tyrion noticed her watching him and carefully recomposed his face to a more neutral expression.

“Another thing to consider…” Jaime added. “We travel at a pace greater than that of the dead. Here, we may have a month or two to prepare. If we make for Harrenhal with haste, then that may give us six or more. We need time, and we need strong walls. Harrenhal would give us both.”

She saw that Jon was convinced now.

“If we leave this castle, we abandon the whole of the North when we do,” Lord Glover said into the silence that settled about the room. It wasn’t clear from his tone whether he agreed with Jaime or not, nor did he continue with any specific objection. He was right, however. This castle was the last Northern stronghold available to them and to abandon it did feel a bit like surrender.

Jon was quiet for a moment. “Look outside, Lord Glover,” he said. “Look at all the fires down below. We would not be abandoning the North, because we bring the North with us.” There was a long silence as Jon regarded each of them. “There is nothing here for us but death.”

“And what about the queen?”

This question came from Jorah. It was not accusatory, nor was it an impassioned plea. It was merely a statement, said plainly.

Sansa looked at her brother, and so did everyone else. She did not envy him this decision. How does one admit that they are forced to abandon their wife to an unknown wilderness? How does a man
make such a decision and keep going?

“We will continue to search for her and Arya the best we can,” Jon replied, his voice quiet. She could see that he was struggling with the weight of his own words. “But we cannot linger here if we intend to make for Harrenhal. The weather will only worsen, and think Ser Jaime is correct about the advantage of time it would give us.”

The council soon dispersed, each set about with a specific task from Jon, whether it was continuing to search the castle for any usable material, or to determine status of their forces, or to set scouts ahead and behind. As they left, Sansa remained where she was. So did Jon, and, strangely, so did Tyrion.

“I have dismissed you, my Lord,” Jon said to him, an edge to his voice.

Tyrion didn’t appear to like that, and Sansa watched him carefully. “Do you consider yourself to be the king of more than just the North?” he asked, the question pointed and biting.

Jon stared at him. “What are you implying?”

“I mean no disrespect, but I’d like to point out that half of us did not choose you to lead. We chose her.”

“Feel free to depart then, if you must,” Jon snapped. “You’ve sworn no loyalty to me and I will not ask you to.”

“Do you have some issue with my brother’s command, my Lord?” Sansa asked. “Would you choose some other person to lead in his stead?”


“Daenerys is not here,” Jon answered angrily, his voice a low growl. “I am doing the best I can on her behalf.”

“Well, so am I!” Tyrion said, his voice raising in volume and anger. “I am her Hand-”

“And she is my wife,” Jon interrupted, fists clenched in anger at his sides. “Do you think this is easy for me? Do you think I wanted this?”

“You’re not exactly chomping at the bit to give it away.”

“And to whom would I give it?” Jon asked. “You?”

“I’m not-”

“The North put their trust in me to lead them, and I will do so as long as they will allow me,” Jon continued, talking over him. “I will take them south of here for their own safety. You may join as you wish, just as Grey Worm and the Dothraki and the Greyjoys and your brother all have that same choice. I will continue to seek your advice as part of this council, should you choose to remain, and I will respect your position as Hand to Daenerys. But,” he lingered in emphasis on the word, “I will not have you speak this way to me again.”

The threat was clear. Sansa had not expected it, and from the expression on his face, she could see that Tyrion had not either. Until now, she could tell that the man had not truly seen or respected Jon as a leader in his own right, seeing only the boy recruit to the Night’s Watch that he had traveled with before. He saw only his name, or lack thereof, and though she was sure he had heard the stories
of the things that Jon had done, it was clear he had not entirely believed them.

Until now.

Tyrion stepped back, his shoulders losing their tense bearing. “My apologies,” he murmured, letting out a breath. “I suppose I have let my grief get the best of me.”

There was a long silence as Jon stared at him, eyes hard and face set. “You are not the only man here who grieves for her,” he replied. His tone was still angry, but it was somewhat lessened and a clear indicator of dismissal. This time Tyrion decided to acknowledge it. He bowed his head respectfully to both of them before departing.

Jon walked over to the fire as the door clicked shut, a quiet echo of wood meeting stone in the large room. It was empty now but for the two of them, and Sansa walked around the table to stand at his side.

“Of the two Lannisters in our company, I did not think it would be Tyrion that would challenge you first,” she said. “He’s too clever for his own good sometimes, but I thought he had respect for you.”

Jon was quiet. “To be honest, I’ve been waiting for it,” he admitted. “He may have liked me when I was a boy bound for the Night’s Watch, or a foreign ally to his queen, but that all stopped the moment Daenerys began asking for my counsel and giving my voice the same weight as his own.”

“He likes to have a sense of power,” Sansa concurred. The fire crackled between them. “He may not be malicious about it, but he is not without ambition.”

“I know the feeling.”

“You are not like him,” she said, frowning.

“Am I not?” he replied, sighing. “I joined the Night’s Watch not out of some sense of honor or obligation. I went because it didn’t matter what your name was or where you came from when you swore those vows. The Night’s Watch was a place where power and recognition were attainable for me and within my grasp, and I wanted it.” He was still a bit heated and angry from his conversation with Tyrion, but she could tell he was trying to keep himself calm. “I wanted to be a Ranger. I wanted to be the Lord Commander.”

“You were the Lord Commander,” she said. “And you left.”

She could see pain and conflict in his face. “Aye. Assassination was a hard commentary on my leadership.”

“The opinion of a handful of traitors is nothing compared to the tens of thousands that follow you now,” she pointed out. “You’re a good leader and a good king. We wouldn’t be here if you weren’t. All those with us would not follow you if you weren’t.”

“I’m no better than anyone else.”

“I disagree,” she said earnestly. “There is something about you that people admire, and that was enough for you to convince Daenerys Targaryen to bring her dragons and her armies north. It was enough for Jaime Lannister to break with his sister and join you.” She reached out to touch his arm. “That in itself is better than most could have done.”

Jon ran a hand down his face with a sigh, but did not speak in answer to her. She decided to ask the direct question then, and one she should have raised with him long before.
“Do you want the Iron Throne?” she asked quietly. “If it was offered to you, would you take it?”

He took a long time to answer, his eyes dark and unreadable as he returned her gaze. The fire crackled. “Ask me again some other time,” he said. “I’m not in my right mind enough to answer.”

The moon rose and set twice before they left, and as their army march south down the Kingsroad, she watched the remains of Drogon smolder in the hollowed remains of the southern wall and tower, the smell of burning flesh pervasive and difficult to bear. She and Jon stood together, watching him burn in silence. The simple memorial had started out as just the two of them, Jorah, and Tyrion, but soon people began to filter in behind them, all there to pay their own respects as they passed.

The small form of Lord Umber appeared at Jon’s other side after a while, a folded piece of cloth in his hands.

“He saved my life and he tried to save my home,” the boy explained when Jon looked down to address him. “I wanted to leave something.” Sansa saw that the cloth was a folded banner, red, with the Umber sigil emblazoned upon it. The boy held it tight, and she watched him blink back tears. “And for the Queen as well.”

The last words were murmured quietly and with much sadness. They pained her to hear. Jon only nodded in acknowledgment, a hand on the boy’s shoulder. “I’m sure she would appreciate the gesture,” Jon replied.

Slowly, the boy proceeded forward towards the wall and carefully laid the banner across the stone. He stood there for a moment facing the flames, his small silhouette dark against the snow, before turning back and joining them again to stand in silent vigil.

To her surprise, it wasn’t just Lord Umber that had something to leave behind. Men and women came forward then, one at a time, each setting something down in remembrance. A banner. A broken shield. A sword.

It was goodbye; not only for the dragon that had given its life on their behalf, but for the queen and for Arya as well. It was a goodbye to their home as they prepared to abandon the last bit of the North to the dead.

Sansa rubbed her thumb along the wooden token in her hand, carefully retrieved from a game that she held as most precious among her few remaining possessions. She clung to it tightly, feeling the round edges against her palm. With a heavy heart, she stepped forward and placed it on the stone next to Lord Umber’s banner; a tiny wooden horse that contained all her grief and loss and despair. She said a silent goodbye to Drogon, and to Daenerys. She said goodbye to Winterfell and to her family and to the life she’d hoped to live. And she said goodbye to Arya, both the girl she knew and the woman that she had come to know.

She blinked back tears as she walked back to Jon’s side. He reached out to take her hand as she approached, grasping it tightly, her grief reflected back at her from his own eyes. They stood together quietly as they watched the fire burn, and the North stood with them.
Chapter End Notes

I know, probably not a death you were anticipating for this chapter but...RIP Drogon. I expect this plot development will be controversial, but trust me, it had to happen. There is a method to my madness and hopefully all will eventually be explained in a coherent and believable manner.

Let me know your thoughts/feelings/current favorite song because I need some new music to shake up my commute playlist. I listen to everything.
Moat Cailin II

Chapter Summary

The Night's Watch arrive at Moat Cailin

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Moat Cailin II

Gendry

It had been just under three weeks since they happened upon Daenerys and Arya in the woods, as near as they could guess. It was slow going, especially at first, cutting across country and being forced more than once to shelter in place to wait out the frequent storms that raged across the landscape. Cold snow seemed to seep into every layer of his clothing, and he was desperate for stone walls and shelter from the wind. Thankfully, they weren’t long from Moat Cailin now; perhaps only a few hours left. They’d hit the Kingsroad just before the last moonrise, and that had allowed them to pick up their pace a bit.

At the moment they were stopped for a brief rest, and Gendry used this opportunity to look at the bearings of one of the wheeled carts they had. He’d needed to refashion the metal facets of this particular axle twice since leaving the Shadow Tower, and he wasn’t sure how many more times he’d be able to do it. The metal was already thinner than he would like, and it would not last long if another repair was needed. Kneeling down, he reached through the spikes of the wheel to brush snow and dirt away from the connection.

Gendry saw Edd walk up to him out of the corner of his eye. “How’s it looking?” the Lord Commander asked, clearly expecting bad news.

He sighed, and leaned back on his heels. “I think it will get us to Moat Cailin as long as the road stays clear enough,” he replied. “But it won’t last much longer. I’ll likely need to fashion a new one completely when it breaks again and I don’t have anything to do that with.”

Edd looked at the axle joint for a moment, frowning, then sighed. “Great,” he said, casting his eyes briefly over the contents of the cart. “I’m sure having to carry this shit by hand will do wonders to improve morale.”

Gendry stood up. “Can’t help you with that problem.” Suddenly a laugh rang out over the quiet group, and they both turned to see Tormund speaking with Arya a short ways away. Edd narrowed his eyes at the two of them and Gendry grinned. “Though morale seems fine to me,” he joked.

The Lord Commander looked exasperated. “Those two don’t count.”

Arya and Tormund shared a rather horrifying sense of humor, and when she wasn’t walking with
Gendry she was following the large Wildling man around, wholly engaged in the stories he would tell her, each one more exaggerated and hard to believe than the last. Gendry had heard them all many times by now since meeting the man at Eastwatch, and he could tell that Tormund was enthusiastic about his new, eager audience.

Both of them came over to the cart then, noticing the attention.

“What’s so funny?” Gendry asked her as she approached.

She grinned at him; a wolflike, mischievous one that seemed to burn bright, making him feel warm and strange. He tried to remember if he’d ever seen her smile like this before. Of course she must have - but somehow this was different. Everything about her was different. Her hair, her voice... She wasn’t the girl he knew any longer, but a woman, and he was trying very hard not to notice it.

“Tormund was just telling me about how he tore a man’s arm off once,” she said, bringing him sharply back to the conversation.

“Sounds hilarious,” Edd replied dryly.

Arya’s smile widened. “It was.” She turned back to Gendry. “Do you have to fix the cart again?” she asked, entirely too excited. He’d let her help him the last time - as much as she could do with the one hand still tied across the front of her - and she’d spent the whole process peppering him with questions. It was as if the simple axle connection was some sort of complicated, mysterious weaponry and not a basic fashioning he’d learned to do when he was one and ten.

“No,” he said. “Well...not yet.”

“Can I help you again when you do?”

“Would it matter if I said no?”

She shrugged. “Probably not.”

Edd looked back down at the axle once more and let out a sigh before turning to Arya. “Go and tell the queen we’re about ready to get going again,” he said to her, gesturing his head over towards where Queen Daenerys stood against a tree, speaking quietly with Beric. Arya did as he asked without complaint or retort.

It was a moment before he realized both Edd and Tormund were looking at him shrewdly as he watched Arya depart. “You stare at her any longer and I’m going to start blushing,” the Lord Commander deadpanned.

“I...don’t know what you’re talking about,” Gendry said, a bit defensive. He didn’t like the way Tormund was leering at him.

“She’ll eat you alive,” the Wildling said.

Edd then began to regard Gendry with a raised eyebrow and a bored expression, as if appraising something he found to be simply mediocre. “He’d probably enjoy it,” the Lord Commander replied.

Tormund nodded in agreement. “Aye, most men do.”

Gendry was beginning to feel a bit self conscious now, and he tried his best to be unaffected. “She’s just my friend, is all,” he replied, trying not to think about her, the way he felt about their implications, and attempting to keep himself sounding neutral and unaffected.
Edd clapped him casually on the shoulder. “Might want to practice your lies a bit more if you want us to believe them,” he said, and then he and Tormund walked off, leaving Gendry alone by the cart and entirely flustered.

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**Daenerys**

Moat Cailin was dark and deserted.

Her heart was heavy as they walked towards the ruined castle, lit by the full moon and the brightness of the snow around it. It was clear from the tracks and evidence of cookfires all along the northern side that her army had been there at some point, but how long they’d been gone or what had made them leave was, as of yet, unclear.

Tormund had taken Gendry ahead to go look around while Beric and a few of the Night’s Watch looked around inside. She stood by the northern gate with Edd and Arya, looking back up the Kingsroad the way they had come. The sky was clear for the first time in days, and she gazed at the stars. They seemed brighter than before; as if they knew the sun was gone and wanted to shine a bit more to bring the land below some measure of comfort.

It helped a bit now that they were out of the Wolfswood and into the flat swamps of the southern part of the country. The trees had made the darkness seem so oppressive and closed in, like she was being slowly suffocated. Now it was easier to breathe, and see, and though the full moon was nothing compared to the warmth of daylight, it was still better than no moon at all.

More than anything, she craved the way the sun felt on her skin. She craved its light and its warmth and the way it seemed to easily banish foul moods. Despair crept in easily in the constant darkness, eating away at her, a festering mass of doubt and fear that she tried to keep down deep inside. Would they ever see the sun again? Or would her child be born only to live and die in darkness?

The thought made her tense and afraid.

She crossed her arms about herself in an unconscious, protective motion, as if it would somehow shield the child from the horrors of the world. Right now it knew nothing but her, and it was quiet but for the occasional stirrings that served as a constant reminder of the precious thing she carried. It was safe within her, for now, though she guessed it would come into the world after the full moon had come and gone five times more.

She’d only confided her state to Arya, but she was wondering now if she shouldn’t also inform the Lord Commander. It would be obvious enough soon. Her cuirass was already tight against her and it wouldn’t be long before she would be unable to wear it. She prayed they would be back within the protection of her armies by that time, but if not- well, Edd deserved to know all facts and liabilities of those under his protection. She would want to know, were she in his position.

Footsteps announced Beric’s return, and the three of them looked around towards the northern gate of the keep.

“It’s empty,” he said, the torch in his hand bathing them all in a flickering orange glow. “But an army was definitely here. The hearth in the main hall was lit recently.”
“Don’t suppose you know how recently,” Edd asked.

The one-eyed man shook his head. “Impossible to say. But the great room will fit us all. A good place to get warm and rest for a while.”

Daenerys couldn’t deny that she was weary of the hard travel and was grateful for the opportunity to rest. Edd called to a couple of his Night’s Watch brothers, and they all proceeded into the keep proper. Arya stayed close by to her.

Ghost bounded up ahead of them, a glowing white blur in the darkness, sniffing and exploring in his own fashion. The direwolf hardly left her side these days, and she got the impression that he likely knew of the child somehow, a great protector of it even before it’s birth. She was grateful for the company and the watchful eye of the animal, but she couldn’t deny that it also made her sad. His silence and manner was so similar to Jon’s own quiet way of being that it caused an ache in her heart just as much as she found comfort in it.

Arya and Edd clearly felt the same, though neither one mentioned it aloud, but Daenerys could see it in their faces every once in a while - sad glimpse of shared grief for a man they had all loved in different ways.

They set up a makeshift camp in the hall Beric had spoken of. It was not as grand or as large as the one in Winterfell, but it was enough. The large hearth in the center warmed and lit the room well, and bedrolls were laid out across the floor, all of them intent on staying together in the single room rather than spreading out across the keep. It was warmer that way.

The Wildlings were a hardy people, and even the young children were well tolerant of the weather and harshness of their journey. They were kind to her, hard working, and even this group from a remote part beyond the Wall had heard of Jon Snow and what he had done.

She and Arya had listened to many stories of him in the past weeks, both enraptured by the tales and desperate to hear them, each new piece another part of her husband that she could hold in her heart, to save and treasure so that one day she could tell their child of him; the great man who still lived so brightly in the minds of so many others. Jon himself had spoken of the things they told her, but his own view of himself had been modest, as if he simply did what any other in his position would do. She knew that was not the case, the Free Folk and the Night’s Watch knew that was not the case, and their respect and admiration for him was clear in the tone of their voice and the depth of their grief.

She sat off to the side of the hearth on a bench that had been righted and repaired, focusing on the flames that crackled and burned before her. Arya was at her side, fidgeting.

“You need to leave it alone,” Daenerys said to her as she fought with the tight sling across her arm.

“It’s been over a fortnight,” she complained. “Can’t I take it off?”

“Young collar was broken,” Daenerys reminded her. “That takes longer than a fortnight to heal.”

Arya sighed. “I’m just tired of feeling useless.”

“You’re not useless.”

“I can’t fight. I can’t carry anything. And I can hardly manage to eat because I have to use my wrong hand,” she said. “Seems pretty useless to me.”
“Gendry and I don’t mind helping you.”

“Yes, well, I mind.” She frowned. “Where is he, anyway? This castle isn’t that large. They should be back by now.”

“I’m sure they’re fine.”

Arya sighed again, apparently not inclined to argue. “And what about you?” the younger woman asked after a moment, her tone changing from irritation to concern. “Are you... fine?” A casual, delicate inquiry after her and the child.

“I’m glad to take a break from walking,” Daenerys murmured. “But otherwise all is well.”

“Would you tell me if it wasn’t?” she asked.

Tormund and Gendry walked through the large door at the end of the hall before she could think of how to answer, tearing their attention away from the conversation. Daenerys watched them with a sinking feeling as both looked out over the gathering, searching. Gendry found her and Arya first, and she watched his shoulders fall as he made his way over to them. Tormund split off in another direction, walking to Edd, who was sitting off in a corner.

Gendry, a smith from King’s Landing, was a good man and Daenerys quite liked him. He and Arya got along well, in the easy way that childhood friends would, and though most of the men with them referred to Gendry as “lad” or “the boy”, he was clearly neither of those things. He took it in stride, however, and with good humor. The younger Wildling children loved him. As they walked it was rare to see him with out at least one of them hanging off his arms or riding atop his shoulders, and he never tired of it despite the difficulty of the journey.

Now, he approached her and Arya with a look of resigned determination and sympathy, and Daenerys braced herself for bad news.

“What is it?” she asked directly, not wishing to linger in whatever it was he had to tell her.

He let out a breath and spoke quietly. “Tormund and I found some damage to the south side of the castle,” Gendry said. “And...” He hesitated, as if he didn’t really want to continue. He reached into the pocket of his coat and pulled out a dark shape. “And there is the remains of a dragon there.” He handed the item to her. She felt the familiar touch of dragonscale against her fingers as she slowly took it from him; a black scale tinged with a hint of deepest red.

Drogon.

In her heart, she’d already known it. When he’d not returned for them in so long she’d steeled herself for the truth. She no longer felt him in her mind. The warmth of him that had sat there for years was gone, and it left her with a profound, boundless emptiness. Yet, try as she might to prepare herself, the pain of finally having that confirmation was difficult to bear.

She felt Arya’s free hand take hers in quiet, unspoken solidarity.

Daenerys looked up at Gendry again. “I’d like to see him,” she said, a slight break in her voice despite her efforts. “Will you take me there?”

He looked down at her, sympathetic and kind. “Yes, of course,” he replied as she stood, clutching the dragonscale tight in her palm. She felt the edges of it sharp against her skin, and the pain was an anchor in her storm of grief.
Arya

Daenerys stood in the remains of the southern wall. The queen held a torch in her hand and stood straight as steel and silent as if she were a statue, looking up at the burned and blackened dragon skull that faced them. His body had been burned, mostly to ash, but the larger bones remained; all that was left of the largest dragon the world had seen in generations.

His final resting place told a story of horrifying agony, and each casting sweep of her eyes showed Arya something new: deep claw marks in the stone, dark bloodstains, scattered scales that glittered in the torchlight.

“He was only the size of a cat when he was born,” Daenerys had said to her once. “He would sit on my shoulder and sing to me as I walked.”

Arya tried to imagine it, but she couldn’t. The Drogon she knew filled her mind with his deafening roar and the great beat of his wings. Terrifying. Powerful. She remembered the way it felt to fly; how the cold wind rushed by her, how the scales of his back had been so warm. She remembered the sight of him as he ripped the dead dragon to pieces during the battle at Winterfell, felt the shuddering of the earth as it trembled beneath him. How could something so large have once been small enough to sit on a person’s shoulder?

She couldn’t look any longer. Arya turned away, walking back to where Gendry stood apart from them, giving them space. She could see the sorrow there on his face, and without a word or a pause or anything she threw herself into his embrace. The furs of his coat were soft on her face as he wrapped his arms around her, holding her close.

“This is awful,” she whispered after a moment, pulling away slightly but keeping her arm around him. Snow fell softly, and she watched the flakes settle in his hair and on the furs of his clothes. It was a soft moment, a silent moment, and she took great comfort in it. She sighed. “In a way, I feel a bit guilty,” she admitted quietly.

“It’s not your fault,” he murmured.

“Drogon died protecting my home,” she said. “My family. My people. Daenerys came to save us, and all she’s gotten in return is death.”

“That’s the Night King’s doing,” Gendry replied. “He’s the only one to blame for this.” He looked at her for a moment. “Did you...see the rest?” he asked.

Arya frowned in confusion. “The rest?”

Gendry guided her back to the wall, but then he urged her past it to what she had thought, in the dark, to be more piles of broken stone.


Arya reached forward and pulled at the corner of another banner, and a red dragon on a field of
black emerged from the snow. She held the banner in her hand for a long while, the half frozen fabric stiff and crackling.

Looking up again, something else caught her eye. A small wooden figure lay on one of the stones just ahead of her, nearly obscured and laying on its side. With trembling hands she reached for it, brushing the snow aside with a strange sense of loss and longing. Tears hovered at the corners of her eyes and she tried to blink them away, but it only made her sight blurry. She let out a shuddering breath and brushed them away finally with the back of her free hand, and then looked down at the wooden figure again.

A game piece, well worn, the shape of a horse smoothed so much by age and use so as to be nearly unrecognizable. But Arya knew it instantly.

“What is that?” Gendry asked her.

_It's the statue meant to guard my tomb._ “It's part of a game that Sansa and I would play together,” she answered, staring at it. She realized now that she had stumbled upon her own grave, and she felt very strange about it.

Daenerys came back into view then, the torch she held casting light over the scattered things left by the wall. She stared at each one in turn, running a hand over the Unsullied helmet and a Mormont shield. She then looked at the Targaryen banner that Arya had found, and as their eyes met above it Arya saw that the queen had come to the same conclusion as she.

Drogon hadn’t been the only one that the North had mourned for here.

The walk back to the main hall was quiet and subdued, but easier to bear than their journey out. It was better somehow, knowing. Daenerys seemed stronger and straighter, touched by grief but now sadness had been replaced with a quiet anger. The past weeks together had shown Arya a softer, more subdued version of Daenerys. It had been Daenerys the woman she had been getting to know. Now Daenerys the Dragon Queen was coming back, a glint of anger in her eyes and a determination in her bearing.

Arya recognized the fire of vengeance.

A storm kept them in Moat Cailin for a long time. No one was really quite sure _how_ long, as they had been using the moon to note the passage of time and now it, too, was obscured.

She sighed. First the sun, and now the moon. Would they ever see anything again that wasn’t tinted orange from firelight? She missed being able to see farther than the span of a room. She missed daylight and birds and the warmth of the sun. She missed the colors of summer, and the greens and browns and blues of life.

Arya sat against the wall, turning the wooden horse over and over in her hand, half listening to the murmurs of conversation around her. Gendry sat at her side, one arm resting atop a bent knee, his head back against the wall, asleep. They had been talking together for a while, but he needed the rest despite his calm assertion to the contrary. He did a lot of work for the group, even now when they were stuck inside and not traveling. He fixed things, he amused the Wildling children, he kept watch. Arya wished again that she could help him; once more aggravated by the sling that tied her left arm in place.

Her shoulder and collar still pained her, though much less so than before and it no longer hurt to
move her fingers. She supposed it would bother her less if it wasn’t her sword arm. She wasn’t as competent as she would like to be using her right hand, and it felt strange to have Needle on the opposite side of her. Still, wrongsidedness was better than nothing. She fidgeted with the knot on her sling again, mostly out of habit now and less from a true desire to remove it.

“Stop messing with it,” Gendry murmured quietly.

Arya turned to see him awake, regarding her with an expression that seemed to say ‘really?’ . She smiled a bit in response to being caught. “How is it that you always seem to know?” she asked.

He lifted his shoulders in just the barest hint of a shrug. “You’re easy to read,” he answered.

“That’s not something people usually say about me,” she replied, surprised.

Gendry was quiet for a moment before speaking again. “Perhaps they’re just not looking,” he said.

“And you are?”

“How can I not?” he murmured softly. Something seemed to be strung tight between them, a strangeness that wasn’t there before. Arya didn’t quite know what to do about it, or where it came from, but before she could think about it too much Gendry let out a breath and it diffused, his expression changing from serious to relaxed. “Someone has to keep you from getting into trouble,” he teased.

She grinned at him, grateful the air between them returned to normal. “Shut up,” she said. “Go back to sleep.”

He grinned back. “As milady commands.”

She used her good hand to hit him playfully on the arm. “Don’t call me that,” she said. “I’m not a lady.”

Gendry raised an eyebrow, making a show of appraising her as he settled back against the wall. “Clearly.”

Her gaze lingered on him as he closed his eyes, just for a moment, before she leaned against the stone as well. Their shoulders touched and she liked the simple connection. It grounded her a bit; something pleasant to focus on. A comfort.

She hadn’t realized that she too had fallen asleep until she felt a hand on her shoulder, her eyes snapping open to see Daenerys knelt down at her side.

“The weather is clearing,” she murmured to her as Arya straightened, lifting her head from where it had been resting on Gendry. “We need to get ready to leave.”

“And go where?” she asked.

“South,” Daenerys replied. “And hope that an army of forty thousand won’t be too hard to find.”
this chapter brought to you by my weird af sleep schedule (why am I awake at 5am on a Sunday?!)  

for reference on time, the Night's Watch et al are about a week or so behind the northern army and catching up, as they are a smaller group and have been cutting across country.  

also, I'm laying groundwork for another big battle/conflict starting next chapter, so get hyped (within reason). things are going to start getting plot heavy again.  

let me know what you think.  

personal life update: I got that dope job I interviewed for, btw. thanks for all the well wishes and interview advice. y'all are the best
Chapter Summary

A wild Golden Company appears; the Northern army makes plans; Arya experiences a couple surprising revelations

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The Riverlands I

Daenerys

“Up, everyone up,” Edd said sharply to those around him, rousing everyone in a low, hushed voice. “We have to go.”

She had been half-dozing on her bedroll near the fire, Arya at her side, and both of them sat up quickly at his urgent tone. “What happened?” Daenerys asked him, immediately alert. They had only just stopped to rest a couple of hours ago.

Edd walked up to them, offering a hand to help her to her feet and then doing the same for Arya. “Tormund and I met some smallfolk up the road when we were scouting ahead,” he said. “They were fleeing west. Apparently the Golden Company has landed soldiers at Maidenpool. Soldiers are pushing into the Riverlands.”

Daenerys tensed. She wasn’t certain how far that was from them, but judging by Edd’s expression he seemed to think it too close.

“And they’ve been asking for you by name,” Edd added, the tone low and dark and pointed. “I think they know you’re not with the rest of your forces.”

The suggestion struck her like a cold wind. “How could they know that?” she asked quietly. “You think perhaps there is a spy in my own army?”

“It’s hard to keep an entire army quiet,” he replied. “And I don’t doubt they’ve had desertions, same as us, when the darkness didn’t lift.” He looked at her for a moment, eyes lingering on her. “You should cover your hair,” he said. “If they truly are looking for you, I don’t want to make you easy to find.”

Daenerys immediately began to pull her hair back, knotting it in a loose braid at the nape of her neck. A kerchief she’d been using to keep her face and ears warm was all she had, and she tied it as securely as she could manage. Arya helped her by tucking away loose strands with nimble fingers, working on the edges of her hair near her ear, fingertips cold against her skin.
The camp broke down around them fast, but it was not fast enough.

Gendry came running into the camp towards Edd as they were preparing to douse fires and leave.
“It’s too late,” Daenerys heard him say, and she turned to listen. “Men on horses just down the road. They’ll be here soon.”

“Damn,” Edd muttered under his breath. He turned back to her and Arya, debating within himself for a brief moment before speaking again. “Hide in the cart,” he said, tone clipped. “Both of you.”

“Me as well?” Arya protested. “You said they were just looking for Daenerys.”

“You look like a Stark,” Edd replied. “And you’re dressed in Northern armor. You’ll stand out in the group just as much as she. It will put all of us in danger if they know we are supporting a different queen than they are.” He let out a frustrated breath. “I didn’t spend the past six weeks trying to get you both back to your people just to get murdered right before we get there.” He turned to Gendry. “Help them,” he said. “And quickly.” He was about to walk off, but then he stopped suddenly, looking around. “Where’s Ghost?” he asked her.

“I haven’t seen him since we stopped,” Daenerys replied, realizing the direwolf had not been at her side.

Edd sighed. “Let’s hope he has the good sense to stay away,” he said. “Or we’re fucked.”

Gendry had already started shifting things around in the cart to make a space for them. Daenerys followed him, bringing Arya with her, and the smith helped them both into the back. It killed her to hide while the rest of them stood guard on her behalf, but she understood the reasons for it. They were so close now - within two or three hard marches - and she wasn’t about to let that get away from her.

Daenerys lay stick straight on her back, the wood beneath her stiff and unyielding. Arya lay at her side, arms and shoulders touching. The smell of travelworn furs filled her nose as Gendry worked quickly to obscure them from view, and soon the were both covered and she could see nothing but darkness.

She felt the cart move beneath her as Gendry jumped down, and shortly afterwards the sounds of men and horses began to echo around them. It sounded like a great number, and she felt anxious and worried. Daenerys desperately wished she could see. Beside her she felt Arya tense and slowly began to reach for her dagger.

“Who goes?” a strange voice asked, a Westerosi hint to his Common Tongue. He sounded close.

“Who’s asking?” she heard Edd reply. His voice was level and calm.

“The Golden Company, on behalf of Queen Cersei,” the man answered, a touch of impatient command to his voice. “State your name and your business on the Kingsroad.”

“I’m Lord Commander Edd Tollett. And this here is the Night’s Watch. Our business is trying to get south as fast as possible.”

“The Night’s Watch?” There was a disbelieving question to his tone. “You have women and children with you, Lord Commander.”

“I do,” Edd replied.

The man who spoke seemed inclined to leave that be for now. “And whom do you serve?” he asked,
after a period of silence. Daenerys rather thought that not being able to see what was going on made the situation so much worse. She wondered if her heart could be heard beating outside her chest.

“The Night’s Watch serves the realm,” Edd answered. “And as such I take my orders from the queen.”

“You’re a long way from the Wall.” She could hear the sounds of a horse coming closer and closer to the cart.

Edd paused only briefly. “Aye.”

Next to her, Arya gripped her dagger tightly. Daenerys could feel that the other girl was wound tight like a trap, ready to spring at whatever tried to uncover them. The Golden Company was making its way through the group, the sound of hooves on the ground terrifying her as they grew closer and closer.

“I don’t suppose you want to tell me what you’re looking for?” Edd asked after a moment.

“We seek Daenerys Targaryen,” the Golden Company man replied. His voice was loud as it rang out over them, startling her. He was right next to the cart. Daenerys hardly dared to breathe. “Have you seen her?”

There was another silence. “You lot are the first people we’ve come across in weeks,” Edd answered. “So I’d say no, we haven’t.”

More hoofbeats matched the frantic pounding of her heart as Golden Company soldiers continued to wind their way through the group, the thud and murmur of horses beginning to surround them. No one spoke a word.

“You may proceed on your way, Lord Commander,” the leader said after a while, clearly reluctant to let them go but not making any move to search them more thoroughly. “Stick to the road. If you hear of the Targaryen usurper, send word to me at Maidenpool. I will make it worth your while.”

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Jon

“What are you reading?” Daenerys asked him, her voice the first notion he had that she’d entered the library. He looked up at her in pleasant surprise.

“I thought you would be out with the Dothraki for some hours yet,” he said, lowering the book of histories he’d been forcing himself to pour through. She was dressed simply in riding clothes and the grey cloak he had given her, hair a bit wind-tossed, indicating that she had come straight to find him.

“It didn’t take as long as I anticipated,” she replied, stepping forward. “Qhono and Ser Jorah have things well in hand.” She looked about at the table beside him, strewn with the piles of heavy books and scrolls that he and Sam had been trying to go through. “Have you been in here this whole time?”

Jon sighed. “No, not too long. Sam and I only came in here a couple hours ago.” His friend had gone to see Bran in the godswood, at Bran’s request. “But it feels like ages.”
“Yeri qorasoe san kash ma timvir, Jon Snow,” she said with a smile, gently taking the book from his hands.

He regarded her with amusement as she came to sit upon his lap, her hands moving to wrap gently about his neck.

“I understood my name, and something about books,” he murmured folding his arms about her as she settled against him.

“Anha zhilak yera,” she replied, kissing him softly.

He smiled at her. Those words he did know. “And I love you,” he replied.

Jon didn’t realize he was lost in the memory until he noticed the book he held was about to fall from his hands. He came back to the present with the sharp pain of loss and regret as he thought about his wife, and then, subsequently, tried not to think of her. It would bring him nothing but grief to dwell on her now, and he needed to focus on his task. Memories could wait until he lay abed, alone, trying to sleep and desperately failing as he tortured himself with thoughts of a life he almost had, and the guilt he felt that he even met her in the first place. She was dead because of him.

At present, he was sitting in the large tent he shared with Bran and Sam, reclining against the back of his chair in a comfortable slouch and a lighted brazier between them all. The book he’d volunteered to read through was lengthy and rather dull, and he’d already tried to read it once and failed. The maester who’d written it seemed overly fond of his own speech and Jon had less and less patience for it as time went on.

Sam was beside him, a piece of wood placed across his lap as a sort of makeshift writing table, and the large journal he’d been using to keep notes opened atop it. He was nearing the end of the pages and would soon run out of room.

“Found anything interesting?” Sam asked, noting that Jon had made it nearly a third of the way through the tome in his hands and no farther.

“Define ‘interesting,’” Jon replied with a sigh, looking up over the top of the book to his friend.

“That good, is it?”

“I’ve read grain store reports with more compelling language,” Jon remarked, a bit facetiously.

“That maester is a bit long winded,” Sam agreed, smiling wryly in commiseration. “But his treatises would not be nearly as respected if he’d only written them at half the size.”

Jon raised a disbelieving eyebrow. “And why are they so respected?”

Sam shrugged. “I’ve read them all twice and I’ve still no idea.”

He let out a short breath of a laugh and turned the page, having read the same section now four times over and still not retained a word of it. A drawing greeted him on the right side, a detailed and intricate rendering of a dagger. He frowned at it, unable to shake the strange feeling that he’d seen it before.

He splayed the book out in his hands and turned it outwards so Sam and Bran could see. “Does this dagger look familiar to either of you?” he asked.

Sam blinked at it, frowning. “Perhaps it was in something else we read?”
Bran stared at it for a long, silent moment. “It’s Arya’s,” he said quietly. “I gave it to her.”

Jon lowered the book. Sure enough, now that he mentioned it, it did resemble their sister’s weapon. “Why would it be in this book?” he murmured, half to himself, trying to keep the sudden wave of grief for her at bay.

“Where did you get it?” Sam asked Bran.

“Littlefinger gave it to me,” Bran replied. “It was the dagger meant to kill me after my fall.”

“Arya’s dagger was of Valyrian steel,” Jon said. “People don’t just give Valyrian steel away like that. Especially not men like Littlefinger.”

“Sansa said the same thing,” his brother said. “I’ve tried to find where it is from, but before it came to Littlefinger it changed hands so many times that I don’t know how it got to him or where it was made.”

“Does the book say why the dagger is drawn?” Sam asked.

Jon quickly read through everything on the page. “No,” he said, surprised. “It doesn’t mention it at all. There’s just this drawing, and a bunch of musings about Harrenhal being cursed. Doesn’t even acknowledge the dagger - just writes around it.”

Sam frowned, but before he could say anything else, however, they were interrupted by a visitor. Sansa came into the tent, her brow furrowed and serious. “Theon has returned,” she said.

Jon set the book down and stood up. He’d sent Theon north with some of his men to keep an eye on things in their wake; the area was full of smallfolk and refugees still, many fleeing south to escape the weather and the rumors of the dead. Most had already heard of Winterfell’s fall, and the appearance of himself and the Northerners in their midst had only served to reinforce that fear. A great many of them had joined their caravan, however, and accepted Jon’s offer of protection if they promised to fight on his behalf.

Sansa had used this development to point out that he now had some Riverlands bannermen under his command, which in turn made him king of two of the Seven Kingdoms. He told her that this was an exaggeration, as he’d not asked them to swear fealty to him specifically, but she seemed to think that didn’t matter.

King of the North and the Riverlands - that was more than he ever wanted for himself. He felt the burden of it sitting heavy upon him.

His council was gathered in the command tent a short while later, and it wasn’t long before they were arguing over Theon’s news.

“They’re going to come in behind us,” Jaime was saying, tone frustrated as he stared at the map before them. “I don’t like it.”

“Coming this far south was always a risk,” Tyrion replied. “But the force is small.”

“Not small enough to ignore. Five thousand is enough to cause us problems.”

“And where did you say they are now?” Jon asked, cutting the Lannisters off and turning his gaze to Theon. Apparently the Golden Company had landed some men at Maidenpool, and small companies
of their soldiers were being sent out across the Riverlands, searching for something yet to be determined.

“The closest ones are several miles travel to the north,” Theon replied. “Headed for Lord Harroway’s Town most likely.”

They had just left the crossroads not long ago. There was an inn there, and several camps of the small folk nearby and huddled about had followed them south. He sighed. “Did you find out anything else?” he asked.

“Not about the Golden Company,” Theon said. “But I did hear from a farmer and his wife who told me they saw a band of Wildlings, headed south down the Kingsroad.”

Jon frowned. “Wildlings?” he repeated, surprised. “Are you sure?”

Theon clearly wasn’t. “I only know what they told me,” he said. “I didn’t see them for myself.”

Jon looked at the map before him, well worn and a bit outdated, taken from Castle Cerwyn as they had departed. Harrenhal was still a couple hard marches away. They sat on the Kingsroad, near the half frozen land of the Trident. Rhaegal keened sharply in the distance, the sound cutting through the silence that had befallen the group.

The dragon had followed them from Moat Cailin in spurts, apparently only able to fly for short periods of time before it pained him too greatly and he was forced to land. Jon spent time with the beast as best he could, but the injuries Rhaegal had sustained were significant and there was very little he could do for him. It seemed the dragon was recovering, however, though it was slow and Rhaegal was, understandably, not inclined to let anyone near him enough to really know for sure.

“How many men would you need for a comfortable victory at Maidenpool?” Jon asked, looking up at Jaime.

The older Lannister frowned contemplatively. “You want to take the city?” he asked.

“Tyrion asked, clearly not enthused about the plan that was taking shape. “It’s a small town with nothing to offer. And it’s only five thousand men.”

“You wanted me to hold the Riverlands,” Jon pointed out. “So here I am, holding the Riverlands.”

“If that’s the case, then I think perhaps our efforts might be more useful if we put them towards larger castles.”

“Aye, perhaps,” Jon replied. “If Cersei was the only one I was fighting. But she isn’t. The dead will follow us south soon enough, and right now I’m interested in holding a line between Harrenhal and
Maidenpool that neither the dead nor the living can cross. I’m also interested in the port, and the connection back to Dragonstone that it would give us.”

“A way to the sea would certainly be an advantage, if we could hold it,” Jaime concurred.

Tyrion looked at the map for a long moment. “And what do you plan to do when you take the city?” he asked. “Our numbers advantage goes away with split forces, and who’s to say that the Golden Company won’t try to take it from you again should you succeed?”

“I’ll deal with that problem when it comes,” Jon replied. With a sigh, he turned back to Theon. “Do you know where the Freefolk were going?”

Theon shook his head. “No, just that they were there on the road. About a hundred of them, they said. A number of women and children.”

He could feel Sansa’s eyes on him now, and he braced himself for the objection he knew she would have to his next words. “Theon, you and I will take some Dothraki and go find those Wildlings,” he said after a moment, letting out a long breath as he did so. Theon nodded in understanding, and Jon turned back to the rest of his council. “While I’m gone, Ser Jaime will decide who we will take to Maidenpool, and we will begin our march there upon my return.”

“Do you have to go yourself?” Ser Davos asked.

“Freefolk this far south aren’t going to know the danger they are in from Cersei,” Jon explained. “They are running from one danger straight into the arms of another, and they need help from someone they trust.” He sighed. “They won’t follow Theon, but they might follow me.”

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_Arya_

The Inn at the Crossroads was a well-lit beacon in the darkness, and she rushed ahead with a lightness in her heart, pushing open the familiar door with relief.

“Hot Pie!” Arya called out, searching about until she found him across the room.

He turned to see her, a grin spreading wide across his face. “Arry!”

She liked that he still called her by the name she used while traveling as a boy. It was a comforting nickname, and made her feel like all the terrible things that happened since they parted were less...terrible. She headed for him quickly, a smile breaking out across her face.

“Hello,” she said, embracing her friend tightly. “This place hasn’t changed since I was here last.” The Inn was still run well and much looked after, much to her surprise. She had been the one to suggest they stop here instead of camping on the side of the road again, secretly hoping she would be able to wheedle her way into a room for her and Daenerys. The queen could use some rest in a real bed, and Arya wasn’t going to pretend that didn’t also benefit her in some way.

Sure, she could sleep on the ground without complaint, but even she couldn’t deny that the call of a mattress, whether it was goose-feather or straw, was strong in her mind. Especially after Edd made them ride in a cart, covered up, for the past several hours. Only when he and Tormund had determined that there was no sign of the Golden Company anywhere near did he allow them out.
“Not much happens here,” Hot Pie said. “Though you missed some excitement a few days ago.” He paused and looked over her shoulder with wide eyes. “Gendry!” he exclaimed. “You’re alive!”

Of course, Gendry had followed her as she had broken away from the group, coming forward to stand beside her. He regarding their friend with a raised eyebrow. “Of course I am. Why wouldn’t I be?”

Hot Pie shrugged. “You weren’t with Arya last time she came through here. Just figured you got killed.”

Gendry stared him in disbelief as she tried to keep a straight face. “You thought that of the three of us, I was the one most likely to die?” Gendry replied, tone incredulous.

Hot Pie shrugged. “Arry and I are survivors,” he said, as if that explained everything. “But you can grow a decent beard now though. Looks nice.”

Gendry opened his mouth to retort but seemed to change his mind. “It’s good to see you again, Hot Pie,” he said with a sigh, clapping the boy on the shoulder. “Doing well?”

“As well as I can,” he said. “Though business is not what it used to be, what with the war and it being winter and all.” He ushered them to an empty table and bid them to sit down. “I’ll grab you both something,” he said. “Wait here.”

Arya seated herself on the bench facing the door, wincing a bit as she did so. She was finally allowed free use of her arm again, but her shoulder still pained her occasionally. Gendry sat next to her, concern on his face. “You alright?” he asked. Of course he had noticed.

She waved him off and flexed her arm gently, the soreness of her injury protesting against the strain. Still, having use of her arm again was worth all the discomfort. “I’m fine,” she said reassuringly. He seemed skeptical, eying her closely as if he suspected her of not being entirely honest, but he seemed inclined to let it lie for now. She returned his look in a sort of playful defiance, though after a moment she found herself a bit preoccupied with his face. He definitely had a nice face, she decided.

“You know, Hot Pie was right,” she said after a moment. “About the beard. It suits you.”

The compliment clearly caught Gendry off guard. He blinked in surprise. “Thanks,” he replied, the word a bit stunted.

Hot Pie returned with a tray of food and ale, disrupting the strange moment that was filling the space between them. Somehow she was disappointed, and she wasn’t sure what she was disappointed about. She tried to shrug off her strange confusion by grabbing the closest ale and taking a long drink.

“Heard about your home,” Hot Pie said to her as she did so. “Winterfell. The whole northern army passed this way a bit ago. Awful stuff. People have been fleeing south for weeks.” He paused, lowering his voice conspiratorially. “Is it true what they say? That it’s an army of dead men?”

She swallowed, and set her mug down. “It’s true,” she said, looking at him seriously. “They’ll be here soon. You should head south with us.”

He seemed to consider it. “Where are you going?”

“We’ve been trying to catch up with the Northern army,” Arya explained. “Got separated after Winterfell.”
“I was wondering why you weren’t with them when they passed by,” Hot Pie said. “I saw your brother though.”

“He was here?” Arya asked, hopeful. She was desperate for news of her family.

“Yeah, and your sister too,” he replied. “At least, I’m pretty sure it was your sister. Sat at that table in the corner. And I saw the big lady knight as well. She remembered me.”

“And everyone is alright?” she asked, remembering Brienne’s injuries, and glad to hear that she was alright.

Hot Pie shrugged. “I suppose,” he said. “I didn’t talk to them much, what with it being busy and all.”

He paused, and looked at her. “You look like him, you know,” he said.

She furrowed her brow. “Like who?” she asked, confused.

“Your brother of course,” he said. “Who else?”

No one had ever told her that she and Bran looked similar before. It was always Jon. It was that similarity that had made them so close, both feeling a bit like outsiders within their own family.

“You know, I’ve heard a lot about him,” Hot Pie continued. “And I thought he’d be taller.” An odd thing to say about a man confined to a chair, but she let it lie. “I suppose it makes sense, though. You’re not that tall either. Lady Stark though, she must look like your mother. You didn’t tell me that she was so pretty—”

Arya narrowed her eyes at him. “And what would have been the point of that?” she asked archly.

“Don’t get me wrong, you’re pretty as well,” Hot Pie said quickly, misinterpreting her glare. He looked at Gendry for help. “Isn’t she?”

Arya didn’t care if anyone thought she was pretty or not, but she found Gendry’s hesitation to answer to be incredibly fascinating. He froze, just a bit, when confronted with the question. “Yes,” he said finally, concentrating hard on the bread in front of him as if it were the most interesting bread he’d ever seen in his life. She made a note in her mind to tease him about it later as she turned back to Hot Pie.

“Sansa would destroy you,” Arya warned him.

“But she was so nice—”

“It’s all an act,” she said before trying to steer him back to the main conversation. “Did they say where they were going?”

“Harrenhal,” Hot Pie answered. “It’s abandoned as far as anyone knows. Don’t know why they want that but I guess that’s why your brother is the king and not me.”

“Harrenhal has sturdy walls, if you remember,” Gendry pointed out. “A good thing to have in a war.”

“True.”

“Wait a minute—” Arya said, frowning. “You said my brother was the king?” She couldn’t imagine Bran even agreeing to that responsibility, let alone being chosen for it in the first place.

Hot Pie looked at her strangely. “Hasn’t he been one for some time?” he said, clearly confused. “I
already told you he was King in the North the last time you were here. And now he’s likely going to be the King of the Seven Kingdoms, right? Now that he married the Dragon Queen, and now he has come into the Riverlands? Bannermen are joining him from all over. That’s what they’re saying anyway. Rumors about him have been swirling around here for months.”

Arya felt her mouth go dry and her heart pound in her chest. “Hot Pie, who are you talking about?” she whispered, feeling as if she were stuck in some sort of dream.

“Jon Snow, of course.” He paused. “Is it true that he swore his undying love for Daenerys Targaryen atop the Wall? And that she gave him a dragon as a wedding gift?”

She swallowed. She was gripping the edge of the bench hard beneath the table, her knuckles white and her fingers sore. “You saw Jon, here, a fortnight ago?” she asked, her voice coming out clipped and strained.

Hot Pie frowned. “Of course, isn’t that what I’ve been saying?”

She shook her head. “It’s not possible,” she insisted. “Jon died at Winterfell.”

Now it was Hot Pie’s turn to be confused. “I don’t know who told you that, but he is definitely not dead.”

“No one told me anything,” she said. “I saw it happen. I was there.” The ride to Castle Cerwyn had seemed to take an eternity, holding Jon, and it had seemed to take even longer than that to scrub his blood off her hands. She was sure they would be stained red for the rest of her life. She felt sick.

Gendry turned back to Hot Pie. “You’re sure, here,” he said, an edge to his voice. “Absolutely sure you saw Jon Snow, here?”

“Ariya stared at him, wide eyed and unable to think of what to say. She didn’t know how it could be possible. How could Jon be alive? How could he have been here?

He was dead.

So consumed by her own thoughts and memories was she that she didn’t notice the others coming over to join them.

“What’s wrong?” Daenerys asked, her voice pulling her back to the present and away from the constant replay of Jon’s death, over and over and over. She looked up to see her looking at the table with worry; Edd, Tormund and Beric behind her.

“Hot Pie, you need to tell them what you just told us,” Gendry said, speaking for her when Arya struggled to pull herself out of what she was feeling. She was grateful for him as he looked at Edd and Daenerys as they sat across from them. “He said the Northern army passed this way several days ago. They were headed to Harrenhal.”

Edd sighed. “Well at least we know that,” he said. “I’m a bit tired of walking.”

“We’ve been going south so long I’m waiting for us to walk off the edge of the world,” Tormund said, taking a seat on Gendry’s other side. Daenerys remained looking at Arya, and she felt intensely studied under her gaze.
“We’re nowhere near the end of the world,” Edd replied, annoyed. “We’ve only just passed the middle.”

Tormund made an indistinct grunt of disbelief in response.

“Tell them the other thing,” Gendry pressed Hot Pie. “The thing about Jon.”

This got everyone’s attention, and Hot Pie was suddenly nervous under all the scrutiny. “I saw him,” he said finally. “These two don’t believe me, but I saw him. Here. With his army.”

“I don’t understand how,” Arya interjected, feeling a bit heated. “It’s not possible. He’s dead.”

“Well, he’s not dead anymore,” Hot Pie insisted again.

“What he suffered was not something you can recover from,” Arya replied hotly. She felt Gendry squeeze her hand under the table. “That spear practically cut him in half. The Hound had to-“

She stopped speaking abruptly, her breath catching in her throat, as she looked at Beric.

He had been killed by the Hound once. She saw it happen. Gendry had as well. She only just now remembered that Beric had actually died, right in front of her. The sword had gone right through his collar and nearly severed his arm, and yet he rose again. He lived.

Beric seemed to know exactly what she was thinking. “It appears that there is more to your brother than we thought,” he said after a moment. “You said the witch Melisandre was at Winterfell? She could have done it.”

Arya remembered her whispering over Jon as he lay upon the breezeway, how she had used darkness and flame to save her and push the Night King away. She could command fire...and apparently bring people back from death.

“Jon is...alive?” Daenerys asked, her voice barely a whisper as the two of them made astonished, disbelieving eye contact. Arya could see a painful hope in the queen’s face, and it was hard to bear.

There was a moment of silence in which they all absorbed the news, but Arya was suddenly overcome. She needed to be alone. She didn’t want to cry at this table. “If you all will excuse me,” she said, her voice a bit strained, before she walked out of the main room and out into the snow.

She wasn’t out there long before heard footsteps. “I’m fine, Daenerys, I’ll be back in a minute,” Arya said, her voice choked and her chest hurting, trying not to think of Jon but also consumed with hope as she dared to imagine that he still lived. Tears stung at her eyes and she tried to take a deep breath, but it was a shuddering, stilted attempt.

“Guess again.”

She turned to see Gendry there, and he stepped forward and embraced her without another word. She clung to his coat, burrying her face in the furs and soft leather as he held her tightly. It was a great comfort.

“Do you want to talk about it?” he asked her, his voice low and quiet.

She sighed. “I can’t believe it,” she said finally. “About Jon.” She lifted her head up to look at him, still holding tight to his coat to keep them close.

A wry grin brought up the corner of his mouth. “It is hard to wrap my mind around,” he admitted.
“But I’m glad for you. And for the queen.”

The sudden shock was dissipating, and was quickly being replaced by a lightness in her heart. She felt almost weightless with relief. She grinned back at him, full on, before letting out a long breath. “I’m sorry I ran out,” she said. “It was just—” She struggled to find the words. “I don’t even know what to say, to be honest.”

“Arya Stark at a loss for words?” Gendry teased. “Isn’t that a surprise.”

She held back a laugh, and one of his hands came up to her face, his thumb swishing away the path of the single tear she had shed. It was a light touch against her skin, and it made her feel warm despite the cold wind. She closed her eyes briefly at the touch and she could feel his other hand on the small of her back, sharply aware of each individual press of his fingers even through her cloak and leather.

When she opened her eyes again he seemed almost transfixed on her. She tilted her face upward and saw his eyes flick down to her mouth. She felt tense with anticipation.

Would he do it?

Did she want him to?

While she was not entirely sure of the answer to the former, the answer to the latter was most certainly yes. She’d never wanted that from anyone before, but it was hard to deny what the moment urged her towards. All her training she’d ever had told her to trust her instincts, and every feeling, every part of herself screamed for it. This was the cause of the strange tenseness between them that she had noticed. This was the reason that things had changed somehow. It was more than friendship for the both of them now.

There was nothing more plain in his eyes than what she saw echoing back at her, but she saw hesitation there as well. Despite all they had been through both together and apart, he still seemed…

Well, she wasn’t sure how he seemed. She began to second guess herself, and wondered if the strangeness had all been in her head only, and that things were still, well, normal, in Gendry’s mind. They’d never talked about it.

Slowly, his other hand reached up to tuck a wild strand of hair behind her ear. He froze there, only for a moment, and she was almost sure that he would do it. She waited, breathless.

Yet, instead of closing the distance between them like she expected, Gendry stepped away and the moment was broken. “We should go back inside,” he said. He was trying to sound normal, but there was pain in his voice as well. It confused her.

She wondered if he could see the disappointment in her face the way she could see conflict in his.
so I wrote the conversation between Gendry and Arya and Hot Pie literally months ago, updating it every now and then as I changed parts of what I had planned. you guys don't even know what a relief it is to finally get to this point narratively and actually like, post it.

gonna try and do another midweek update this week. looking like I won't finish this story by the time season 8 starts, so hopefully you guys will still be interested in the end of this shit even as the real thing starts playing out

as always, let me know what you think
THE RIVERLANDS - PART II

Gendry

“This is actually really good,” he said to Hot Pie.

They were standing in the kitchen of the Inn at the Crossroads, and Gendry had been recruited into trying some of the more adventurous pie recipes. Their caravan was set to head towards Harrenhal, and a great many of the Riverlands smallfolk were set to join them. The group as a whole was anxious to catch up to the Northern army and the safety that it offered.

“Which one do you like better?” Hot Pie asked eagerly.

Gendry looked down at his choices. It was hard to pick a favorite, really. He was so used to travel rations and hard bread that anything different tasted like the best food he’ve ever had.

“Perhaps the middle one,” he replied, taking another bite out of it just in case.

Hot Pie opened his mouth, probably to ask another food related question, but Arya burst through the door instead and they both turned to look at her. She pushed through it with purpose, striding forward with a determined glint to her eyes. Her gaze landed on Gendry immediately.

“I need to talk to you,” she said, with purpose. “Right now.”

Gendry took a moment to carefully chew the last bit of pie in his mouth before swallowing. “What about?” he asked, immediately uneasy.

Arya looked at Hot Pie. “Go away,” she said bluntly, and then amended it with a “please” that almost sounded polite.

Hot Pie looked at him, then to Arya, and then back to him again in confusion, but he did leave. “…I have to pack my things anyway,” he said, regarding them both with a bit of suspicion.

Gendry and Arya were alone in the kitchen now, but apparently that wasn’t good enough. She stared at him for a long, silent moment that made him intensely uncomfortable. “Go in there,” she said finally, nudging him towards the small door to his left.
“What?”

Arya opened the door, and after some confused hesitation, he did do as she asked. She followed, and closed the door behind her to plunge the small room into darkness. The light of the kitchen fire glowed from the gap at the bottom the door, casting deep shadows across them both.

“Is there a reason why we’re in here?” Gendry asked her when she didn’t immediately start speaking. The room - barely a pantry, he was discovering - was cramped and left little room for movement. He tried to put space between them, but shelves dug unyieldingly into his back in three separate places, preventing escape.

“I don’t want to be interrupted,” she said.

“The only person around was Hot Pie and you told him to leave;” he pointed out. “This,” he gestured around them, “seems a bit unnecessary.”

“Shut up.” After a long, tense moment, she sighed. “I wanted to talk to you about before, out in the yard.”

Gendry froze. He’d hoped the moment had passed them both by and that she’d not noticed. After all, nothing had really happened. They had returned to the main room to celebrate that Jon Snow was, in fact, alive, and all had settled back into lighthearted normalcy. Friends, just as before, and, just as before, he’d hoped the strange tension between them would be lost to the past.

“What about it?” he asked. His heart began to pound.

She seemed to hesitate on what she was going to say, which made him even more nervous. “If I ask you a question, will you tell me the truth?” she inquired, her voice a whisper.

“Yes,” he replied.

“You wanted to kiss me.”

Direct. To the point. He regretted his easy promise of honesty almost immediately. His mouth felt dry and words failed him. “I- er, that’s...not a question,” he objected.

“Confirm or deny,” she said quietly. “Did you want to kiss me or not?”

He could see the outline of her mouth in the light that spilled from underneath the door. “Yes,” he admitted finally, barely able to breathe it out. “Yes, I did.”

“And why didn’t you?” She was looking up at him, head turned slightly to the side as she waited for his answer.

“I wasn’t sure,” he said. “I wasn’t sure if I...should.”

Even in the dim light, he could see her frown. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, regardless of how you or I feel, you’re still a lady from a great House, and I’m a...blacksmith.” He could tell right away that she didn’t give any credence to this argument. Sure, it was hard to take it seriously out here in the company of Wildlings, away from the obvious structure of society they both grew up in, but what about when they joined with her brother and his army? What then? Rules that had governed the world long before any of them were born would not just suddenly...disappear.
She was staring up at him, her face half obscured by darkness. “You’re from a great House too,” she replied with a whisper.

The world was silent and still, but her words hung between them like a bright torch. He wanted to see the world how she did, unencumbered as she seemed to be by rules and willing to do as she pleased, but it was hard to let go of the past somehow. It was as if he stood upon the edge of a cliff.

Arya, in typical fashion, made the decision for them both. She closed the distance between them slowly and pressed her lips to his, sweet and soft. A careful step forward into the unknown. She lingered in it a bit, and he wondered if she could hear his heart beating as hard and as deafening as it was in his own ears.

The silence afterwards seemed stretch on forever as neither of them moved. “I’ve been wondering what that would be like,” she whispered after a while. Her lips brushed against his as she spoke.

Gendry struggled to remember how to form words. “And?” he asked.

Her answer was to kiss him again, this time with more confidence. He wrapped his arms around her as he felt her hands on the side of his face, behind his neck, and in his hair, pulling herself closer into him. He kissed her in return, slowly at first but then with a more insistent urgency, as if somehow something had been missing and they were making up for that lost time.

In those moments, all he knew was her.

And then the door opened.

He broke away from her to see Edd there in the doorway, wearing an expression of resigned annoyance. “You do realize this is a pantry,” he said flatly.

There was a beat of awkward silence as Gendry’s mind tried to catch up with what was happening. Arya still had her arms about him and made no move to let him go. The heat of her still burned bright in his mind.

“We were just discussing some things is all,” Arya replied casually, as if that was indeed all they had been doing.

Edd was unimpressed. “Clearly,” he deadpanned, regarding them both with an exasperated sort of expression. “Get out of there and go make yourselves useful,” he said finally, as if scolding a couple of children. “We’re leaving.”

Arya finally released him and slid her way out of the cramped space. Gendry could see the amused look on her face at Edd’s obvious annoyance.

He supposed it was funny, in a mortifying sort of way. Not at all how he’d imagined it would go. And not that he’d dwelled much on it either - most of his efforts had been spent trying very specifically not to think about it.

Certainly, however, there would have been no pantry involved. And a lot less Edd, which likely would have also suited the Lord Commander just fine, considering the look on his face as he ushered them out of the kitchen and into the yard.

Tormund appeared almost as soon as they’d walked out of the Inn. Gendry braced himself for the inevitable teasing, but the red-haired Wildling was already preoccupied with something else.
“There’s some trouble,” he said to Edd.

“What kind of trouble?”

“The kind where someone’s father was killed by Wildlings at some point, and that someone has decided to take it out on us,” Tormund replied, tone making it perfectly clear where he stood on the issue.

Edd sighed. “Show me, I’ll handle it,” he said, resigned, but turned to look at Gendry and Arya before he walked off. “Go find the queen,” he told them sharply. “And keep your damn hands to yourselves.”

In response, Arya deliberately grabbed Gendry’s hand and pulled him away.

The yard was crowded with people and carts and horses and he allowed Arya to lead him through it all, her hand remaining in his. The moon was full and the skies were clear, and when the light of it glinted off the snow he could almost pretend it was day.

“You’re awfully quiet,” Arya said after a while, stopping by their cart and turning to him. She looked at him with a raised eyebrow.

“I think I left part of my mind back in that pantry,” he replied honestly, still kind of shocked and astonished at what had happened between them.

Arya grinned. “Me as well, I think,” she said.

He let out a breath as he looked at her. He’d thought perhaps that crossing the line, as they had just done, would change something about them or alter their friendship in some way. That would make things different. To his surprise, however, he was quickly finding that this was not the case. Everything was delightfully, wonderfully, the same.

His earlier fears evaporated into the moonlight. “So...what now?” he asked her.

She stepped forward and leaned into him. “I don’t know,” she said, shrugging. “But you can kiss me again if you’d like.”

“The Lord Commander told us to keep our hands to ourselves,” he murmured in reminder, but he brought her face to his anyway, stopping just before their lips met. “Why are you the one that’s always getting me into trouble?”

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Daenerys

She saw Arya and Gendry across the yard, though as she walked up to them she pretended that she hadn’t. It was clearly a sweet moment between them and she didn’t want to interrupt.

“Edd says it’s time to leave,” Arya said to her in greeting as she approached. Daenerys noted that she had taken care to put an arms length of space between her and the smith. Gendry held his hand out to take Daenerys’ bag from her, and walked over to put it in the cart with the rest.
“And where is the Lord Commander?” Daenerys asked, looking around for him.

“He and Tormund are preventing fights,” Arya replied. “People still have sore feelings at the end of the world.”

“It takes a lot for people to change,” she acknowledged. “Now more than ever people will be clinging to what they know.”

“Even if that means picking fights with Wildlings?”

She sighed. “Yes, even that I’m sure. Hopefully they are able to keep it from escalating too far.”

“Jon would have no patience for that,” Arya said.

No, likely not, Daenerys agreed, and once again she felt her heart swelling in her chest at the thought of him, alive.

And so close.

She was desperate to see him again and wished she could take a horse and ride hard to him right now so she could see him for herself, so she could see that it was well and truly her husband that lived.

Daenerys felt a grin breaking out across her face, and Arya noted it with one of her own. “I can’t wait to see him either,” Arya said, correctly guessing where her thoughts had gone. “Part of me doesn’t want to believe it until he’s there in front of my own eyes. My heart will be wild until then.”

She knew the feeling.

Gendry returned, glancing back behind him with a slight frown. “It may be some time before we depart,” he said. “Edd looks like he’s still in the middle of it over there.”

“No, I—” A small handful of snow hit Gendry right in the side of the face as he tried to respond, and the sound of giggling children reached their ears from the direction that it had come. Arya laughed.

He sighed good-naturedly. “If you’ll excuse me,” Gendry said, trying to dust the snow out of his hair and collar. “It appears I need to defend myself from Wildling invaders.”

“I wish you good fortune,” Daenerys replied with amusement.

There was only about six children amongst their group, all of them likely under ten years, and they screamed and ran in delight as he went after them. “Stay close,” Daenerys heard him warn as he bent down to prepare his own answering fire.

She watched Arya as she stared after him, wondering if she should broach the subject at all or if she should wait for Arya herself to do so.

She didn’t have to wait long.

“Do you know who his father is?” Arya asked suddenly.

Daenerys frowned at the unexpected question. “Does it matter?”

Arya sighed. “Probably not,” she admitted. “But I should probably tell you anyway. His father was Robert Baratheon.”
An unexpected answer to a question that Daenerys hadn’t asked. She looked over at Gendry again, a little ways away, now using one of the smaller children as a shield against the snow being thrown in his direction. He held the child with ease and the laughter echoed around the yard.

He was the son of the man who had killed her brother and destroyed her family.

She took a moment to appreciate the irony of their association.

Arya was waiting for her reaction, and all Daenerys could really do was shrug. “He seems to be a decent man,” she replied. “I don’t intend to hold the actions of his father against him.”

Quite a hypocritical stance that would have been.

“I didn’t think you would,” Arya responded. “But I still thought it was important for you to know. I wasn’t sure if Jon had told you.”

“Jon knew—” she cut herself off abruptly to correct her speech. “Knows, I mean?”

“Yes. Him and Ser Davos. Gendry said he hasn’t told anyone else and doesn’t really intend to. He didn’t even know himself until after I’d known him.”

Daenerys was quiet for a moment. “Thank you for telling me,” she said, meaning it sincerely. “It nice to hear that I have more family in the world.”

Arya looked at her with a surprised smile. “I hadn’t thought about that,” she said, bemused. “I suppose he is at that. Cousins, right?”

“Yes, I believe so.”

Her face lit up in wicked delight. “Can I tell Gendry?” she asked excitedly. “I don’t think he knows that, and his reaction will be—”

The screams of the children changed from joy to fear. Daenerys whipped her head around in alarm just in time to see Gendry stagger backwards.

The fletching of an arrow stuck out high from his chest.

Out of the darkness, fire emerged in an arc above them. More arrows thudded into the Inn, their flames catching the dry thatched roof quickly.

Arya started to immediately bolt towards Gendry, but Daenerys snagged her arm and held her back as more arrows rained down upon them, embedding themselves into horses, people, and the ground. People began to scream as men on horses burst through the trees, swords and armor glittering in the light of the moon, fire in their hands.

The cart had protected the two of them, but the horse attached to it panicked and tried to run, causing the cart to overturn and send its contents flying. Bedrolls and cook pots and belongings tumbled over them as they were forced down onto the snow, and Daenerys and Arya scrambled fast to escape being crushed further by the cart as it came down. Flaming arrows stuck out from the side of it, buried deep in the wood.

Her heart pounded in her chest as she looked around frantically. Snow was cold up her sleeves and down the neck of her collar. She tried to pull herself to her feet, but she was tugged sharply backwards back into the snow, the straps of her cloak hard against her and nearly stealing her breath.
She gasped and struggled with fumbling fingers to loosen the buckle, the task difficult as her fingers shook with cold and fear and shock.

Arya came to her aid as she was freeing herself, leaving the cloak behind as she was urged to her feet. “I don’t see Gendry anymore,” Arya said, a bit frantically, but then they both heard someone calling out for her.

“Arya!”

It was the boy from the inn, her friend. They ran for him as the Inn began to blaze, lighting up the night. The heat of it was scorching.

A horse ran towards them, a golden clad soldier in the saddle, and Arya stepped in front of her. She drew out her dagger and flipped it downward in one smooth motion, then rushed forward to down the man’s horse in a movement so quick that it was almost as if Arya had disappeared from her side and reappeared ahead of her.

Blood from the horse sprayed the ground and Arya, and it tossed its rider as it fell with a horrible sound. Arya then moved to the soldier, disarming him quickly by kicking the sword from his reach and slashing at the gap between his helmet and breastplate. More blood soaked into the ground. The smell of it filled the air.

She reached back and grabbed Daenerys’ hand tightly to pull her forward at a run.

“Hot Pie!” Arya said desperately as they reached him, hiding at the far side of the stables. “Have you seen Gendry?”

“He’s here,” Hot Pie said. “I saw him get hit and I pulled him back—“

Arya pushed past them both. Daenerys followed after instructing Hot Pie to keep an eye on the yard for anyone approaching.

Gendry was propped up against the wall; he had been struck three times by arrows; on the right side of his chest, his side, and again in his left thigh. Blood soaked his coat and neck and his breathing was labored and ragged. Arya knelt at his side and took his face in her hands, calling his name, fear and emotion and desperation in her voice.


The smith opened his eyes at the sound of her voice, but he began to slip down the wall. Daenerys sank down to her knees at his side and held him up. She started to lean him up against herself to hold him better, but she saw the arrow in his shoulder had gone straight through and had to adjust her position to avoid the point going through her as well.

He left a streak of dark blood along the wall behind him as he whispered Arya’s name.

Daenerys felt powerless. She didn’t know what to do for him, and by the distraught look on her face, neither did Arya.

Screams grew louder, and the sound of flames and falling stone thundered from the Inn. Daenerys looked up sharply to see sparks leaping high into the air as the Inn became consumed by flame, collapsing in on itself.

“Help me up,” Gendry said through gritted teeth.
Arya looked at him as if he’d spoken in another language. “You’ve an arrow in your leg,” she said. “How can you-”

“I can manage,” Gendry said, cutting her off and already trying to hold himself up on his own power. “Help me so we can get out of here.”

“They’re coming,” Hot Pie said urgently, turning to them, but as soon as he did so, an arrow punched its way through the boy’s neck. Blood splattered over them all. Daenerys felt it across her face and she closed her eyes in horror. Hot Pie fell to the ground in front of them with a heavy, horrifying, thud and Arya rushed to her friend, pressing her hand to the wound in futile effort. Daenerys could see helplessness in her eyes. She looked at Gendry, and he wore the same look of shock and grief.

Hot Pie bled out into the snow between them.

The world seemed frozen and silent as Arya knelt there with shaking hands, stained red.

Then a Golden Company man appeared around the corner, grabbing Arya from behind and pinning her arms. Gendry tried to lunge for her but fell into the snow, taking Daenerys with him. Arya screamed in either pain or rage as Daenerys tried quickly to right herself, and as she came up on all fours she saw Arya break free and fall into the snow, scrambling for her sword.

Arya was on her back as the soldier held up his own and brought it down swiftly.

“No-” Gendry cried out as Arya rolled out of the way just in time, the clang of the sword sharp as it glanced off her own, just barely missing her and driving a deep gouge into the snow and dirt beneath.

Arya kicked out the man’s knee and brought him down. Daenerys thought she’d almost had the upper hand, but the soldier rose fast and swung his sword again.

It was going to cut Arya completely in half, and Daenerys yelled out sharply before she even had time to really consider her words. “Stop!” she said desperately. “Spare her. Take me,” she said, pleading.

The man stopped his sword just short of Arya’s chest and kicked her back down to the ground, nudging her sword out of the way with a disdainful push of his foot. Arya tried to reach for the dagger at her back and the man pressed his sword sharply into her leather cuirass.

“Reach for that dagger and I’ll tear your throat out with my bare hands,” he snarled.

“Stop,” Daenerys said again, hands going to her kerchief. “Please.”

“Don’t!” Arya protested, staring at her, eyes wide as she figured out what she was doing. “Don’t do it-”

Daenerys pulled the kerchief away and let her hair fall out of it. “I am Daenerys Targaryen,” she told the soldier, heart pounding in her chest. “I know you’re looking for me. Spare her and everyone here, and I will go with you.”
Jon

The clear sky and waning moon shone brightly, revealing the carnage before them with unrelenting
detail. What had once been the Inn at the Crossroads appeared out of the trees before them, now
nothing but smoking, smoldering embers. Bodies were strewn about, dark shapes against the churned
and bloodied snow. A cart had overturned with its horse still attached, though the animal was stiff
and clearly dead.

“Check to see if anyone lives,” Jon said quietly to Theon and Ned Umber, and he repeated the
command in Dothraki to Qhono. He dismounted from his horse, boots squelching in the half melted
snow. He could still feel the heat of the Inn even from here.

Death was obvious with most; felled by arrows or the sword. The thick furs were no match for steel.
Most were unarmed; slaughtered like animals.

“Your Grace.” Ned Umber spoke normally, but in the quiet it seemed as if the boy had shouted. The
words carried out over the area and Jon turned to regard him as he stood some ways away. “I think
this man is from the Night's Watch.”

Jon walked over quickly and regarded the body for a long, still moment. He was indeed clad all in
black, and four arrows pierced his chest. He felt the shock of recognition and the pain of grief all at
once.

“I know him,” he murmured quietly. “His name was Oren.”

“I thought Castle Black was destroyed,” Theon said quietly, walking over to them. “What is he
doing so far south?”

“I don’t know,” he said, letting out a breath. “Keep looking.”

They spread out again and Ned stuck close beside him. Jon felt sorry for bringing him along - he’d
not expected this carnage and would not have done so if he had. Though at one and ten he was
already the veteran of two battles, Jon still felt like he should be shielding the boy from this
somehow.

They came upon child before them a little while later, eyes staring at the sky in fear and an arrow
through his chest. Jon thought of Rickon, and tried to push away the wave of guilt he felt when he
thought of his youngest brother.

If only he had been faster.

Ned checked the boy for signs of life, still hopeful despite the clear result, and Jon let him.

If only he had been faster here as well. Could he have saved these people?

After a moment, the young lord looked up at him in sadness and grief for the dead child, and Jon had
no words of comfort to give him.

They made their way slowly around the side of the Inn, checking everyone, and eventually ended up
near the stables. This building had burned as well, but was mostly intact. There were two more
people back here, a Wildling and a Riverlands boy from the looks of it, both felled by arrows. Ned
pressed forward to check the Wildling, but Jon didn’t feel the need to check the other. An arrow had
gone through his throat.

“Your Grace!” Ned called out, looking up at him with surprise. “This one is still alive!”

Jon stepped forward quickly to kneel down beside the man, pulling off his glove to check for a heartbeat, but he froze.

He knew this man too.

Though he’d grown longer hair and a beard, he was still instantly recognizable.

Gendry.

While the Dothraki began to gather the dead and burn them, Jon had Theon and Ned help him right the cart that lay in the middle of the yard. If it could still be used, they would have Ned’s horse pull it back to camp with Gendry in the back, and hopefully the man would survive long enough until they could get him proper help. They cut the ends of the arrows, three in total, and bound his wounds the best they could.

The cart had been somewhat loaded when it had overturned, and as Theon kept an eye on Gendry, Jon took a moment to look at all the belongings that were strewn about in the snow beside it. Furs, bedrolls, a shield...all of it in the style of the Freefolk.

It made him angry to see. These people had traveled all this way to escape the dead only to be murdered by the living. He felt powerless and ineffective and helpless as he looked at it all; things that had belonged to someone now burning to ash on the other side of the yard.

He was about to turn back to the cart as they prepared to leave when something on the ground caught his eye. Grey wool with white stitching peeked out from beneath the scattered debris. He knelt down and reached for it, tugging sharply to release it from beneath the heavy crate.

“You seem nervous,” Ser Davos commented.

They were to headed for Winterfell the following day, the end of their two-day residence within New Castle after the long journey from Dragonstone. The two of them walked through the streets of White Harbor side by side, and for some time in silence, as Jon tried to find exactly what it is he was looking for. So far the only decision he’d made was to decide that nothing he saw really seemed quite right, and he already felt like he’d scoured every inch of the entire market street twice over.

Jon sighed. “Perhaps,” he admitted, after a brief internal struggle of whether he would own up to it or not.

Ser Davos was gleefully amused. “Interesting that it’s this sort of thing that scares you - not facing down a cavalry all on your own, or venturing out beyond the Wall with only a handful of men at your side.”

“That’s fighting. It’s different. I know how to do that.” He gestured around them at the busy street. “This is not something I’ve ever done before.”

“A surprise in itself. For many it would be the opposite.”
“I don’t know if you noticed, but there weren’t a lot of women at the Wall,” Jon said dryly. “Nor the gold or opportunity to buy them anything if there were.”

“No girls at Winterfell growing up then?”

Jon let out a short breath of laughter. “No,” he said. “I think my father would have frowned upon it, all things considered, if I had even been remotely interested in anyone.” He sighed, feeling a bit melancholy at the thought. “Sometimes I wonder what my he would say, if he were here. If he would want any of this for me.”

Davos was quiet for a moment, clearly not expecting the turn of conversation. “I never met Lord Stark,” he said finally, as they stopped at a cart piled high with shining furs. “But I know Stannis spoke very highly of him.” The older man placed a hand comfortably on Jon’s arm and regarded him with a serious expression. “Do the best you can to live a good life,” he said. “Find a good woman and raise good children. That’s all fathers really want for their sons.”

The comment was heartfelt and genuine, and at first Jon didn’t quite know what to say. “I thank you for your wise counsel, Ser Davos,” he said after a moment, meaning every word as he ran his hand along the different combinations of wool and fur, all in varying styles, from practical to ornate.

“You know you only need but ask,” Ser Davos replied. “It’s the listening part that we still need to work on,” he added, grinning.

Jon shot him a half smile in response, but before he could say anything else, he found it. A grey wool cloak with white fur and matching white stitching that shone in the sun. He knew instantly that it was what he had been looking for. He pulled it out of its place and held it out before him, looking at every detail.

It was perfect.

“Do you think Daenerys would like this?” he asked.

Ser Davos smiled at him. “I think the queen would treasure anything you choose to give her,” he replied.

Jon stared at the cloak in his hands in two different points; his memory of a sunny midday in White Harbor, the fur brushed and shining in his hands, and now, in the darkness of the Long Night, he held it again, travelworn and ruined in the middle of a massacre.

He was frozen in place. Without a doubt in his mind he knew this was hers. She’d worn it when she had saved him and Ned Umber at Last Hearth. She’d worn it when she stood beside him and addressed his lords, strong and confident.

She’d worn it in the Godswood at Winterfell as the sun set, holding his hands before her and smiling brightly as she said the words I take this man -

His chest hurt as he tried to breathe. There was a roaring in his ears as he clutched the garment tightly in his hands.

Theon’s voice cut through his spiraling emotions and Jon looked up at at the sound of his name. He turned to see him and Ned at the cart, looking at him with urgency. Jon hurried back to them, worried that Gendry had died, but the situation was quite the opposite.
The smith was conscious, eyes wide and breathing labored. Theon held a hand to his chest to keep him steady and still.

“Jon-“ Gendry struggled, his voice hoarse and quiet. “They were here,” he said. “Arya and the queen- they’re alive. And they were here.”

Jon held the cloak tightly at his side. “They are not among the dead,” he told him. “Do you know where they are?”

It took Gendry a moment to respond, pain etched across his face. “The Golden Company has been looking for her. Daenerys,” he said. “We’ve been trying to keep her hidden since we got to the Riverlands.” He shook, and each word seemed to take monumental effort. “I’m sorry,” he continued, chagrined and despairing. “I’m sorry. They ripped her from my hands-“

“It’s not your fault,” Jon assured him, trying to sound calm even as anger and rage boiled within him. “We’ll get them back.”

They returned to camp as fast as they could and did not stop to rest. Jon had Ned keeping an eye on Gendry, who slipped back into unconsciousness shortly after they had left the Inn and had yet to reawaken.

As soon as they reached the outskirts of their encampment Jon nudged his horse into a gallop, tearing through the rows of tents and cookfires at great speed, pulling his horse up short of his command tent in the center, where he knew Sansa would be.

Tyrion was in there with her, as well as Ser Davos and The Hound, and all three came out quickly as they heard him approach.

“Did you find the Wildlings you were looking for?” Sansa asked, immediately noting his urgency, anger, and the fact that he rode up to them alone.

“Aye,” Jon said. “They were there.” He dismounted. “Slaughtered with the rest of the smallfolk, but for one.” He turned to Ser Davos. “Gendry was among them,” he said. “Go find Sam and meet them up the road. Hurry.”

Davos barely had time to comprehend his own shock before he departed quickly to follow Jon’s orders.

“Who’s Gendry?” Sansa asked.

“A smith and a friend that I last saw at Eastwatch,” Jon said quickly. He turned to the Hound. “Go find Jaime and Jorah,” he asked him. “I need to see them immediately.”

“What are you planning?” Tyrion asked as the Hound departed as well.

“The slow, excruciating death of every Golden Company soldier that I see,” Jon snarled.

Tyrion was quiet for a moment. “That seems a bit...excessive,” he said, frowning, looking to Sansa for support. She gave him none.

“Yes, well in the middle of that massacre I found this,” he snapped, pulling his wife’s cloak from his saddlebag and throwing it at the dwarf with some force. “Along with the bodies of several men that I cared for and admired. So you’ll understand my anger perhaps, and find it justified.”
Tyrion stared in shock at the cloak in his hands, also recognizing it. “You think she is...still alive?” he asked, clearly surprised. Sansa stared at the cloak as well, eyes wide.

“Gendry said she was with them. Arya as well. The Golden Company made an effort to take them both alive,” he said. “So I am going to go and get them back.”

“Have you thought about the fact that maybe they did it on purpose?” Tyrion asked hesitantly. “To draw you out and get you to react?”

Jon had thought about it. In fact, once the initial surge of emotions had subsided, it had been his first consideration. “They took my family, Tyrion,” he said, emotion shaking his words. “I’m not going to stand by and do nothing.”

There was a long, tense silence. “So what are you going to do?” Sansa asked, her gaze slowly moving from the cloak to meet Jon’s eyes. There was a fierce anger there that matched his own. She would not caution restraint this time, he knew. They were of the same mind.

“I’m going to march our forces to Maidenpool,” he said to them both, rage dripping from every word. “And I’m going to destroy it.”

Chapter End Notes

friendly reminder to never love anything because I will probably kill it. RIP Hot Pie.

let me know what you think. see you dudes on Sunday
Chapter Summary

Maidenpool.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The Riverlands III

Jaime

Maidenpool shone in front of him like a beacon in the night.

At his side, Grey Worm stood silently with his helmet tucked into the crook of his arm. He snapped a command to his men, and the air echoed with the setting of thousands of shields and spears.

“I am not interested in prisoners,” Jon had said to them both. A clear indication that no quarter or mercy was to be had. Indeed, they had brought enough soldiers with them that any reasonable commander would see them and immediately surrender; though he guessed - and correctly, he might add - that the sudden swiftness of their attack gave them some element of surprise. The Golden Company had expected some form of retaliation, but judging from the half finished cross posts and other incomplete defensive preparations, they hadn’t expected it quite so soon.

Jon pulled his horse up next them both, a silent, angry figure in the night.

Jaime had been unsure of whether or not he wanted to participate in this siege or not. He was very vocal about his reluctance to engage Cersei or her forces in any way, but even he had to acknowledge that acquisition of Maidenpool would be helpful in their fight against the dead; a port to sea for either supplies or for retreat.

So here he was, commanding the charge against the Golden Company, and feeling surprisingly little inner conflict about it.

Tyrion had been quite the opposite, especially in the recent wake of Jon’s return from the Crossroads. He’d not been a fan of his quick and merciless response, though it was a smart move, tactically. Slamming into the city as fast as possible gave them another advantage, and Jaime preferred to have all the upper hand that he could get. Battles were easier to bear when you knew you were on the winning side.

His brother didn’t understand this. Then again, Tyrion was always one to prefer conversations to bloodshed.

Jaime looked up at Jon Snow and saw no hint of his father there. Ned Stark would not have planned this attack. He may have loved Catelyn Tully, but he would not have razed a city for her.
No - Jon was something else. Something darker. There was a ruthlessness about him that ran deep, and now it was coming out in full force.

He could respect that.

“How did you get into Winterfell?” Jaime asked him as they regarded the city below. “When you took it back.” It had been a question in the back of his mind for months. How could an army of disorganized Wildlings penetrate the great doors of Winterfell’s keep?

Jon was quiet for a long moment. “I had a giant break the door in,” he said plainly. He could have sworn the young king smiled just ever so slightly, though it was impossible to confirm in the darkness. “When ready,” Jon said finally, nodding to Grey Worm.

The Unsullied commander barked in Valyrian, the ring of his words deadened by the snow, and his soldiers responded in kind. Then, slowly at first but then at speed, they proceeded down the hill towards the gate.

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**Daenerys**

She sat stiffly in the chair she was offered, her wrists bound together tightly in front of her.

The commander of this particular company sat before her, silent, his hair short and touched with grey. He’d never introduced himself or gave any indication as to his rank or address, so she had just taken to calling him The Commander in her mind, along with a few choice descriptions of his manner and appearance. She had been here some time before he came to see her, appraising her once with an underwhelmed expression, and then again just now, both meetings conducted in frustrating silence.

“Where are my companions?” she asked, for the hundredth time.

“They are unharmed,” the Commander replied, finally speaking. His voice was not what she expected.

“That’s not what I asked.”

“I should remind you that you are not queen here,” he replied, arching an eyebrow as if she were some girl with an overactive imagination. His condescension was infuriating.

“What do you want from me?” she asked finally, not really expecting an answer to this either.

And yet, he did. “Nothing really,” he replied, pouring a glass of wine for himself, and then another for her. “It’s Jon Snow that I want.” He handed the cup to her as he approached. She made no move to accept it, and he set it on the table before her anyway.

“Why him?”

He sat down across from her, relaxed and shrugging as he did so. “Those are my orders,” he replied. “And I’ll only get paid if I deliver him to King’s Landing.”
“Jon will never go with you,” she said, though in her heart she knew that it was a lie. He would do so in a heartbeat if he knew that her life, and Arya’s life, hung in the balance.

The commander seemed indifferent. “I suppose you would know better than I,” he said. “As his wife. But I think you are underestimating him.”

She stared at him coldly. “It’s a political alliance, nothing more,” she said.

“His actions would suggest otherwise.”

Daenerys tried not to react. “The efforts are for his sister, obviously,” she murmured. "Where is she?"

The commander eyed her with a raised eyebrow. “Somehow, I doubt you,” he replied, ignoring her inquiry. “I’ve heard rumors.”

She scoffed. “Rumors are not truth.”

Perhaps,” he acknowledged. “But even the most outrageous tale is based somewhat in fact.” He took a sip of his wine, staring at her with a calculating expression as his eyes flicked downward to her untouched glass and then back up to her face. “And you do carry a child.” he said simply. “I assume it’s his.”

She felt cold at his perception, though she tried not to react. Daenerys had hoped that it was still early enough to remain a secret beneath her furs and armor. “Does it matter?” she replied finally.

He took another drink of his wine before setting the goblet back down on the table, expressionless. “I have his sister, his wife, and a possible son and heir,” he said. “Jon Snow will do whatever I say. His siege will bring him nothing.”

_____________________

Arya

Maidenpool smelled like death and stagnant water. At least, that was her dominant impression of their cages; stone walls beneath the ground that seemed to be consistently damp. Arya suspected they were beneath the castle, but it was impossible to know for sure. She felt blind and buried, and it made her skin crawl.

They had been down there for some time - enough for someone to throw food at them twice and for Arya to sleep once. She only sparingly indulged in either.

Tormund was in the same cell with her and a couple of the smaller children. Edd occupied another down the hallway with some other Freefolk, and she had heard Beric calling out from near the door earlier. All total it seemed there was about thirty of them taken from the Crossroads. Not a single one of them was Gendry, and she didn’t want to think about what that meant. Instead, she occupied her mind with trying to find a way out.

So far, however, she’d not had much luck. The bars were straight, immovable rods of steel as thick as her arm and close enough together that she could barely stretch a hand out. The walls were
smooth and damp and there wasn’t a single loose stone or crack to be found.

She prowled back and forth, from one side of the small cell to the other, over and over until it seemed she might wear a path in the floor.

“Does it help?” Edd asked finally, his voice a weary echo.

She turned to regard him, merely a shadow in the dark cell across from her. “Does what help?”

“The pacing.”

Arya went again from one wall to another. “I haven’t decided.”

They hadn’t seen Daenerys since they arrived, and that’s what Arya hated the most. She hated not knowing. Six weeks they’d spent together since Castle Cerwyn. Six weeks Arya had watched over her. And now, so close to safety and to Jon, Daenerys gives herself up to save their lives.

Arya let out a growl of frustration as she slammed a balled-up fist into the stone. The pain of it was sharp, but it helped her think.

Daenerys should have run. She should have escaped into the trees and saved herself and her child.

But that wasn’t the type of person she was.

The door at the top of the stairs banged open and voices echoed down to them, loud and indistinguishable amongst the thudding footsteps and clanging of armor. They appeared with torchlight in hand, three of them, stopping at each cage and peering into them with cold, narrowed eyes. And then:

“Her,” the leader said gruffly to the other soldier behind him, staring at Arya.

She barely had time to react before they grabbed her arm and slammed her tightly against the bars. Tormund lunged forward in reaction, but a third man pushed his sword through the openings, warning him away. He ignored it and tried to help her anyway, but the soldiers burst into the cell and pulled him back, forcing him to his knees. The children cried.

Arya struggled against the hold they had on her. The cold metal of the bars was harsh on her skin. The grip on her wrist was tight enough to send pain shooting through her fingers, and her injured shoulder ached in protest. They dragged her out forcibly as she tried to fight them, her boots scraping along the stone, and in the torchlight she saw Tormund’s expression of helplessness as they dragged her away.

The stairs led both up and also still further down into darkness. As they approached, Arya used the wall to throw all her weight against the man who held her in a sudden, swift, movement. It had the desired effect of knocking him off balance, and he released her to catch himself on the wall and prevent himself from falling down the stone steps. He was quick to recover though, and no sooner had she regained her own footing than his hand swung around fast to backhand her across the face. It was like she had run face first into a wall and she staggered, tasting blood. She responded with a swift kick, and the first man slipped on the stairs. Before she could see if he would recover, the second man lunged for her, snagging his hands on her cloak and yanking her backwards. Arya fell hard onto the ground and gasped as air was forced from her chest. He used her temporary immobility to stand over her, but as he knelted down, likely to knock her unconscious, she regained her senses and sent the flat of her palm straight up into his face as fast and as hard as she could. She felt his nose break and the warmth of blood well up beneath. He howled in pain and she kicked him hard in the
She tried to go for the dagger at his waist, but he grabbed her arm and pulled it away. His other hand went to her throat. She coughed and struggled as he began to choke her, but she managed to spit blood in his face in retaliation. His grip loosened and she grabbed the hilt of the dagger, bringing it up as fast as she could and burying it under his jaw to the hilt.

The man twitched unpleasantly, and with deep, shaking breaths she pushed him off her with a growl of pain and effort. Blood soaked her hands and her face.

She got up, ready to fight the other two men, but saw that Tormund had killed the other, and the first man was gone. The Wildling was just standing by the stairwell, watching her.

“You could have helped me,” she said, a bit accusatory, the words gasping and breathless from exertion.

Tormund shrugged. “You were doing alright.”

She looked around. “What happened to the other one?”

He pointed down the stairs. “I was waiting for him to come back up, but something tells me he’s not going to.”

Arya sighed, and then looked back down the hall of cells. She bent down to search the man she had killed, rifling through his pockets for the keys and coming up with nothing. They must be on the man who’d fallen.

“Are you going to let us out, or do I have to ask politely first?” Edd asked dryly, his voice echoing down the dark hallway.

“I’m working on it,” Arya replied, annoyed, still tasting blood in her mouth.

“It looks like she threw the keys down the stairs,” Tormund replied to Edd.

She heard him audibly sigh. "Nice one," the Lord Commander said.

Arya pulled one of the torches off the wall, her shoulder aching in protest. She made sure that Tormund could see her as she rolled her eyes. “I’ll be right back.”

The stairs curved downwards and to the right and she proceeded cautiously, torch in one hand and the dagger in the other. Tormund followed a couple steps behind. There was no sight nor sound of movement, and she could see dark blood glistening on the stairs as they neared the bottom, and soon her small orange circle of light revealed the body of the Golden Company man, neck and arm bent at grotesque angles.

She let out a breath and handed the torch to Tormund. This was the man she had fought at the Crossroads, and she was glad to see him dead. She didn’t know for sure if he was the one that had killed Hot Pie, but it seemed like justice and vengeance to her in any case.

Well, partly. She wished he had died directly by her hand, but there were plenty more men in golden armor for her to kill.

As she went through the man’s clothes for the keys to the cells upstairs, she also saw a familiar hilt poking out beneath him, hidden by his cloak.
The dagger Bran had given her.

She pushed the man over with some effort and pulled the dagger and sheath from beneath him. The familiar hilt felt good in her hands, and she smiled.

Then the torchlight began to move away, casting her in longer shadows and then in darkness.

“Hey,” she called out to Tormund with a frown. “Where are you-”

She cut herself off short as she saw him standing a little ways away. Her heart stopped when she saw what he was looking at.

Barrels and barrels lined the room, dripping in a sinister, glowing green.

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**Jon**

His sword came up to take a hand from the soldier that rushed forward, and then with another sweeping arc he took the head as well. It was jarring and a lot more difficult than he expected; this was his first attempt at fighting since Winterfell, and he already decided that the plain sword he had now was doing him no favors. He hated carrying it and he hated wielding it. The balance and length was all wrong, and he felt like he might as well be hacking at people with a dull bit of wood for all the good it seemed to do.

He missed the ease and finesse of Longclaw, and he grieved for its loss.

Some Manderly bannermen swarmed ahead of him as he knelt down by the twitching body of the man he’d just killed. He stared down at it as blood poured from his neck into the street, and he stepped out of the way slightly to prevent it from getting on his boots.

Jon carried a second sword with him too; a small, thin blade he’d found in the snow at the Crossroads. Though it was slight, Needle’s weight at his side seemed heavy and burdensome. It was a constant reminder that, once again, he’d failed to protect those he loved. Anger rose within him like a wave, and he pushed it down with a sigh and a clench of his fist, looking down to focus on the dead man once more.

The sword this man had carried was much nicer; a gold pommel on a dark hilt, and nearly matching Longclaw in length. Jon dropped the one he held without much care and knelt down to undo the swordbelt and pull it away, pushing the body over with his foot to release it fully. He picked up the man’s sword as he rose, and twirled it in his hands a couple of times over.

Yes, this one was much better.

“You going to take his boots too?” the Hound asked dryly, having watched the exchange.

Jon shrugged as he glanced at them. “They’re not really to my taste,” he said in reply.

They continued pressing forward. Blood ran in dark rivers down the streets. Golden armor shined in the moonlight. Screams of dying men echoed in his ears. The anger that filled him when he saw the
aftermath of the Inn had not abated, and it burned within his chest with such a painful fury that it seemed almost likely he could breathe fire himself.

They took Maidenpool with a methodical swiftness, clearing it street by street. What little smallfolk that still resided there were pulled from their homes and sent from the city to shelter behind the lines over the hill.

Twenty men fell in his path, and then twenty more.

They were halfway to the castle at this point. The fighting had dissolved into a dozen separate skirmishes once they reached the main square, but after that it had been almost easy to overwhelm them.

After that, the courtyard of the castle then became a dirty, brutal melee, decisively ended once Jon himself had killed the last of them with a dagger to the throat. The blood of other men stained his clothes.

The entrance to the castle proper was heavily barricaded and proving difficult to break. This created a temporary lull in their advance, and though it would have been a good opportunity to rest, Jon could not. He was still tense, wound tight, and though the fighting had been a brief relief to the storm of anger inside him, now it came swelling back in full force. He walked through the dead piled high around him, feeling very little emotion about it, and Jaime walked at his side.

"It will take awhile to breach it," Jaime told him, looking at the castle with a dispassionate shrewdness. "Unless, of course, you have a giant in reserve that you didn’t tell me about."

"I’m afraid not," Jon said, wiping his sword clean with a couple swift strokes and sheathing it. "How long?"

The older man sighed. "Not quickly."

"That’s not the answer I wanted to hear," Jon replied, frustrated.

"I’m not here to tell you what you want to hear," Jaime pointed out. "I’m here to help you win."

Jon pulled off one of his gloves and ran a hand through his hair with a sigh. He was about to ask Jaime another question when a commotion to the right began to catch their attention.

Out of the darkness of the torches he could see someone running towards him.

"I see your sister doesn’t need our help to rescue her," Jaime commented as Jon realized who it was.

Arya sprinted for him across the yard, leaping deftly over piles of debris and the dead.

"Jon!" she called out desperately, urgency and fear in her voice. "Jon!"

He was immediately alert as she skidded to a hard stop in front of him, breathing hard. Her face and neck was covered in blood, her clothes ripped and ashen. Her hair blew in the wind, unbound and wild. She looked fearsome.

There was a brief, silent stillness as she became clearly overwhelmed at the sight of him standing before her, not dead. He knew exactly how that felt, and he had to remind himself to breathe. She was here, she was alive.
Arya then threw her arms around him tightly in a brief, heartfelt embrace. The bow he had slung across his chest was an uncomfortable stiffness between them, but she didn’t seem to care.

“Are you alright?” he asked her as she pulled back. He was still stunned at her sudden and gruesome appearance, though he supposed he did not look much better.

“I’m fine,” she said between heavy breaths. “Listen to me,” she continued. “We found something beneath the castle.” Her eyes were tense and full of fear. “They have wildfire beneath the city. Enough to blow this whole castle to nothing.”

Jon stared at her. “What?” he asked, a dark pit of dread forming in his chest, hoping desperately that he’d misheard.

“Wildfire,” Arya said again. “I’m sure of it.”

He turned to look at Jaime, whose calm dispassion was now fading. Jon could see anger beneath his careful composure. The commander let out a breath that fogged in the air, tense with rage, and he turned and walked quickly to Grey Worm, snapping a command as he did so.

Jon looked back to Arya. “How many were taken with you?” he asked her.

She turned and pointed. “That is everyone, except Daenerys. She’s probably still in the castle. I don’t know where.” Her face was chagrined, her tone angry.

Jon followed her indication to see a number of men he’d thought he never would again. Edd, Tormund, Beric, with a few more Black Brothers and Freefolk behind them. He could see women and children. Rage surged through him again. He looked about and called for the bannerman closest to him, which turned out to be Lord Glover.

“Get these people out of here,” Jon instructed him. “And any other townsfolk that you see. Get them out and over the western hill as fast as you can.”

Lord Glover did not argue or protest, snapping to his orders immediately. He’d likely overheard the news Arya brought and understood the urgency. Jon looked back at Edd and Tormund, wishing he could greet them with more than a nod and a glance.

There would be time for all that later, he hoped.

He let out an anxious breath and turned back to his sister. His hand went to the buckle that still held Needle in its place and she stared, disbelieving, as he held it out to her. “Want to help me break this door down?” he asked.

Arya took Needle from him, and grinned in answer.

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**Daenerys**

Daenerys continued to sit in tense, anxious silence for hours, listening to the sounds of battle grow closer and closer. Each moment was another death on her behalf, and the time went by in long,
drawn-out agony.

“Call a cease-fire,” she asked the commander, who was sharpening his dagger across the table. “Let me speak to Jon.”

“I don’t think so.”

“He’s going to press his way forward,” she said. “You won’t stop him. The wait is just costing you men.”

“And him as well,” he said, shrugging. “He’ll get here eventually, and we’ll speak then.”

“You would sacrifice your own forces this way?” she asked, incredulous. “For nothing? A foolish waste.”

He regarded her with a cool nonchalance. “I know you’re used to people listening to you,” he said. “But you should know that I care little for your opinion.”

The sounds of fighting grew closer and closer, and soon it was right outside the door. The stout wood shook and splintered as men screamed in agony and the sound of swords rang loud and sharp. The commander barked out calm orders for the rest of the men to form up by the door, standing up and drawing his dagger. He grabbed her arm as well and pulled her to her feet roughly. The door splintered again.

He pushed her forward so that she was front and center on the dais, holding her in front of himself as they waited for the door to be breached.

It was a horrifying, breathless, wait as she listened to the pounding on the door, both desperate to see those that had obviously come for her, and yet wishing they would leave so that no more would die on her account. It was a trap, and she was the bait, and they had pushed their way right into it.

She prayed that Jon hadn’t come himself, but she knew it was foolish to think he wouldn’t.

The door burst forth, shattering inward with some force as the familiar phalanx of the Unsullied pushed through the small number of Golden Company men that tried to hold it.

The commander gripped her harder, and she cried out through clenched teeth as he held a dagger to her neck; the cold steel sharp and menacing as it dug into her skin.

“You make a sound of any kind and I will kill you in front of him,” the commander hissed in her ear, his calm demeanor gone and replaced with a cold brutality.

One of the Unsullied came forward, spear in hand, but he froze at the sight of her. It was Grey Worm, she saw, tense with quiet rage. She could see Jaime Lannister just behind him.

Then, out of the darkness of the hallway, someone else strode up through the ranks of the Unsullied, past Jaime and Grey Worm, to stand in front of them all.

Her heart stopped.

Jon stood before her, close enough that she could take four steps and run to him if she were able. His face was carefully composed, but she could see the rage and anger that sat just beneath the surface.

There was a tense silence, and Jon was the one to break it. “You have my attention,” he addressed to
the commander behind her, his voice low and filled with wrath.

“Good,” the commander replied. “I want to discuss the terms of your surrender.”

Jon narrowed his eyes slightly. “And why would I do that?” he asked. “I have your castle.”

The commander pressed her forward and dug the dagger sharply into her neck, and everyone reacted. The Unsullied stepped forward. Jaime barked out the command to hold. Jon slung the bow from his shoulders and drew it taught in a quick, smooth motion; his eyes blazing and his face set at a point just to the side of her right ear.

The commander moved her forward, just a bit, pushing her roughly and adjusting his position behind her. Jon didn’t back down, holding the bow taught, the arrow point still as a stone. He showed no hesitation or fear.

Daenerys felt the blade of the knife pierce her skin just at the tip, a sharp, stinging pain followed by the trickling warmth of blood as it ran down her neck in a single line.

“Go ahead then,” the commander said, taunting him. “Can you trust your own aim? Will that arrow fly faster than I can move your wife and child into its path?”

She begged him to look at her, so that he could see the truth her eyes that the commander did not lie. Please, Jon, she begged silently. Please look at me.

He didn’t.

“She will go,” was all Jon growled in reply. He didn’t acknowledge the news in any way. Daenerys saw a movement behind him, and to her great relief she recognized Arya standing there, sword in hand, wearing the same flat expression as her brother. Daenerys hoped that meant the others were alive too.

“Put down your bow so we can discuss terms like civilized men,” the commander replied. “I hear you are a man of honor, and I assure you I am negotiating in good faith. It would be in your best interest to hear what I have to say.”

There was a long pause that seemed to last an entire lifetime, and then the arrow point lowered. Infinitesimally at first, but then it was soon pointed down to the ground. Daenerys felt the dagger point loosen in response. She didn’t even dare to breathe.

“What is it that you propose?” Jon asked.

“I’m prepared to cease hostilities against you and your armies, and fight alongside them against the threat that comes from the North,” the commander said. “In exchange, you personally surrender yourself to me and accompany me back to King’s Landing. If you don’t come willingly, or if I am killed before I deliver you to Cersei, then the deal is off and I give the word to destroy this city and everyone in it.”

There was a long, horrible pause as the words echoed over the room. Nobody spoke or moved.

“It’s a generous offer,” the commander continued. “You, in exchange for the safety of everyone in Westeros.”

Daenerys stared at Jon, taking in his face and his bearing. He did not seem particularly disturbed or surprised by the threat, nor by the dangled offer of what he wanted most - an alliance of the living to fight against the dead. She was sure he would accept. Jon always did what he had to do.
A tear ran down her cheek.

“Fine,” Jon said, after a long silence. Though she expected this, her heart broke. Behind him, Arya looked at Jon sharply in surprise. “Let her go, and I’ll go with you.”

Still, he did not look at her.

“I want your word.”

Jon looked him straight in the eye. “You have my word,” he said, unflinchingly. Another tear fell. Please don’t do this.

The commander seemed to be trying to determine whether or not Jon was lying to him, but after a long moment she felt him slowly begin to pull her back up the dais. Jon remained where he was, still as a statue.

“Follow me,” the commander instructed him. “Leave your men and your weapons here, and I’ll release her.”

One step. And another.

On the last, the heel of her boot caught on an uneven stone and she stumbled. The commander held her tight to keep her from falling, but her position slipped just enough. A small misstep that should not have mattered.

Before she could even blink, Jon had raised his bow again sharply. There was a twang and then a sickening crunch in her ear as she and the commander were jerked violently backwards, the dark fletching of an arrow barely a hairsbreadth from her face. The warmth and smell of blood filled her nose. The dagger scraped along the side of her neck to fall limply to the ground with a clatter. The commander’s grip on her loosened and he fell back, the arrow pulling at her hair and the weight of him knocking her off balance.

She thought she was going to land hard on the stone, but Jon was there in an instant. Daenerys felt herself shaking as he steadied her, a hand to the side of her face as he looked her over quickly and urgently. Unsullied swarmed past them to meet the rest of the Golden Company that remained, and the sound of swords and the dying screams of men rang through the hall.

Jon paid it all no mind. The cold disinterest in his face was gone, replaced with hope and relief, hands smoothing back her hair. His movements were quick and with purpose, and once he seemed satisfied that the blood across her face did not belong to her, took her hand and snapped into action.

“Everyone out,” he ordered sharply.

Her heart pounded in her chest and she felt tense with fear in the madness of their escape. Something scared them all desperately. Jon’s hand never left hers as they fled, bursting out of the castle and down the main road, past the still forms of the dead - most of them wearing gold but a fair few in Northern plate and the black armor of the Unsullied.

The smell of death and blood was potent as they made their way to the gate, the aftermath of Jon’s rampage through the city still fresh and glistening in the streets, deathly silent but for the hurried footsteps of their group.

More dead were spread out in the churned and bloodied snow just outside the gate, a further testament to the cost of her rescue. Guilt and anger that so many had died clashed hard with the feeling of relief that swelled within her once they began to crest the hill to the west of Maidenpool
and were cleared of the city.

Others were waiting for them; she could see Arya standing next to Tormund and Beric, and Edd a few steps away, speaking with a number of Freefolk that she recognized from their caravan. She felt weak with relief as she saw them, grateful they had been spared.

No one had the chance to speak, however, as a terrible rumbling began to shake the ground beneath them. She turned back to Maidenpool with horror, the walled town still for a single moment before the flash of green light and the deafening sound of screaming stone filled the night and sent them all to the ground.

Jon pulled her in close as the force of it reached them in a terrible hot wind. Small pieces of rock and debris fell around them, peppering the ground, hissing into the snow and landing with sharp thunks on quickly raised shields.

She clutched tight to the fabric of his cloak, her body pressed to him, and tried to concentrate on nothing but the smell of leather and dirt and the feeling of his chest rising and falling with each breath. He held her tightly as the sound of Maidenpool’s destruction thundered in her ears, one hand covering her head and the other about her waist.

The green flame burned brightly even through her closed eyes, her face close against him.

It felt like a lifetime before she was able to hear her own heart beat again as the sound of the explosion subsided; Jon relaxed his embrace of her just enough for them both to sit up, though she kept one hand gripped tightly to him. The eastern sky was full of smoke that was tinted a sinister sort of glowing green. A soft, chilled breeze brushed past them to send the smoke out over the bay, keeping the sky above them clear for the light of the silver half moon to shine down upon them.

She turned away from it all to see that it was now, finally, that Jon looked her. Plain, naked relief shone in his eyes. Neither one made any move to stand. His arms were still tight around her.

Daenerys reached forward slowly to touch his face, wanting to feel the warmth of him. “You’re here,” she murmured, her voice breaking. “It’s really you.”

He closed his eyes briefly and leaned into her touch before opening them to look at her again, his expression searching and serious. “It’s really me,” he whispered.
let me know what you think. or if anything needs clarification. sometimes I forget you guys can't read my mind.
The Riverlands IV

Chapter Summary

Jon deals with the aftermath of Maidenpool; Sansa organizes the occupation of Harrenhal

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The Riverlands IV

Jon

Jon pulled his wife up from the ground, the warmth of her touch healing and reassuring. Her arms were strong and tight around him as she threw herself into his embrace, and they held each other for the first time in weeks. He pulled back to kiss her forehead, a cheek, and finally capturing her lips with a fierce and desperate longing, not caring that others stood around them, nor paying any mind to the city that burned in the valley below. He thought only of her and the way it felt as she kissed him in return, her hands soft and warm on his face.

Tears ran down her face as they broke apart, and he used a thumb to gently brush them away. Her hands moved down to grasp tightly at his cloak, her fingers entwining in the fabric with desperation, as if her hold was the only thing keeping him from disappearing into the night.

Over her head he could see the faces of others in various stages of shock and horror as they all began to process the magnitude of what had just occurred. He began to feel anger rising within him again at what could have happened.

What this almost cost.

Edd made eye contact with him across the snow.

“Will you see them to the camp?” he asked his friend and brother.

“Aye.”

Daenerys pulled away to look at him with a frown. “Where are you going?” she asked.

Jon kissed her once, briefly. “I’ll catch up,” he told her. “Go on.”

She was reluctant to do so but did as he asked, and allowed herself and Arya to be led on back towards camp. Jon turned swiftly and marched back towards the crest of the hill where he knew Jaime Lannister stood, alone.

“Did you know?” he asked him without preamble, his voice hard but not accusatory.
Jaime stared down into the valley, green light reflected in his eyes. It was a while before he spoke. “No,” he said, his voice a quiet anger. “No, I didn’t.”

“Is it possible Cersei has planted wildfire elsewhere?” Jon pressed. “I need to know.” He turned to look at him. “If I’d thought this possible I would have warned you,” he said. The honesty was clear. Jaime was practically shaking with rage. “After everything I—” he started, first clenched at his sides. This was the most emotion Jon had seen from the man since he arrived. He’d endured anger and ridicule from the Northern lords with stoic dispassion, he’d commanded the defense of Winterfell with an almost calm manner, and he’d orchestrated the charge here at Maidenpool with what could only be described as detachment.

Now, that demeanor was crumbling away. There was a tipping point to the commander’s careful neutrality, and this was it. Jon could see the struggle on his face.

“I don’t know what Cersei has done,” Jaime answered finally. “I couldn’t tell you if there is more wildfire elsewhere. But it would be prudent to assume that Maidenpool was not her only focus.” Jon let out a breath. “I cannot allow her to continue unanswered,” he said. “Not after this.”

“I didn’t imagine that you would.”

“Will you help me?”

Jaime was quiet for a long time. The wind blew cold around them. The sounds of their company echoed back over the snow as they proceeded westward, slowly leaving them behind.

“I’m not asking you to support Daenerys’ claim to the Iron Throne,” Jon continued when he didn’t answer. “And I don’t care if you swear some oath of loyalty to me or to her or not. All I care about is defeating the Night King. I thought I could do that without having to engage Cersei as well, but she will be the death of us all if we don’t do something about her, and soon.” He sighed, and glanced out over the ruins of Maidenpool once more. “And I need you to do it.”

It’s not that Jaime was an especially gifted commander, though his age and experience certainly made his leadership easier, but Jon wanted him for a more important reason. Bran had told him the truth of the Mad King’s final moments when Jaime had arrived at Winterfell, and that, in itself, was enough. He knew, despite his name and reputation, that Jaime would do what was right over his own interests. He was forthright and honest and unafraid to disagree with him, and Jon valued that immensely.

A strange thing, finding such value in a man he once despised, and he tried not to think too hard about it.

But these were strange times.

“What if I decided that I couldn’t?” Jaime asked, an edge to his voice. “What if I just wanted to leave everything behind and flee to Essos?”

“Then I would give you a horse and wish you good fortune,” Jon replied.

Jaime turned away from Maidenpool and met Jon’s gaze. “I will help you against Cersei,” he said finally, with no stumble or hesitation. “But when the war is done, so am I.”

Fair enough. Jon wished he could do the same for himself. He had this fantasy that he and Daenerys would leave Westeros behind when this was all over. They would live simply together in a place
where no one knew them, where there were no wars to be fought or crowns to hold. Just the two of them and their children; brave girls and strong boys that would only know summer and laughter, children that they would watch grow up to become something that made the world better.

It was always a bit out of focus in his mind, the details not exactly clear. He couldn’t see his children’s faces. But he always saw Daenerys there, her face bright and shining in the sun, standing in the entrance of their home as she watched their children, her hair a striking contrast against the red paint of the door.

He didn’t know why the door was red, but each time he allowed the dream to take hold it was always there, bright and clear; the red of roses and banners and other such things. The same red as the cloak he now wore; or rather, as it would have been years ago when it had been just made, before age and time had dulled the color.

Jon had never spoken to Daenerys about this dream. It went against everything that she had said she wanted, and yet, he wondered if the dreams she had when they first met were the dreams she still wished for. His certainly were not - especially now that she carried the first of their children.

He had seen the truth of it when the commander said it aloud. He saw the flash of confirmation on her face. Melisandre has been right.

A child.

He felt both unease and the glowing warmth of happiness and relief. They were safe, all of them, and yet he still could feel the dark, clawing grief he’d known when he’d thought them lost; a wife he’d loved, and a child he would never know.

Jon made his way quickly back to the encampment, desperate to see Daenerys, though his progress was not as quick as he would have liked. He kept getting stopped by others needing direction or instruction, and he tried to delegate as best he could. Ser Davos was more natural at such things, and Jon wished for his presence now. He’d left his advisor with Sansa.

He sent a fast rider out to his sister as soon as he could, warning them of what had happened and instructing her to have Harrenhal checked for wildfire. He hoped the messenger would reach them before they got there, or that perhaps Bran had already seen the outcome of the siege, informed her, and that she had drawn the conclusion for herself.

It was some hours yet before he was able to make it back to the area where his tent would be; the large fire nearby now surrounded by familiar faces.

Edd looked up first as he approached, and then Arya beside him. His sister leapt up quickly.

“Where have you been?” she asked.

“I had to send a message to Sansa,” he replied.

She smiled at the mention of their sister, then immediately winced. Jon saw a red welt was beginning to blossom across her face, swelling a bit, easily noticeable now that the blood had been washed away. He took her face in his hand and turned gently, looking at it with a frown.

“What happened?” he asked.

“She was picking fights with men twice her size,” Tormund answered for her.

Arya swatted his hand away. “I’m fine,” she said.
Edd looked up at them. “I’d hoped to bring them back to you without any harm, but…” he looked at Arya. “She’s a lot like you, so you understand how impossible that is.”

Arya grinned, again, and winced, again.

“Though to be fair,” Edd continued, “She did have a broken collar when we found her, so one could argue that her condition was significantly improved by our company.”

“Yes, one could,” Jon replied as he looked down at his sister. “The Night King?” he asked quietly.

She nodded, swallowing hard at the unpleasant memory. “But I’m fine now, see?” she said, moving her left arm in demonstration.

He gave her a wry smile and kissed her forehead. “I’m glad you’re alright,” he said. “Where is Daenerys?”

“She’s inside,” Arya answered, pointing to his tent some ways behind them.

Jon looked at them all once more. “Thank you,” he said sincerely to Edd, and to Tormund, and to Beric. “I am grateful for what you have done.”

He had mostly washed away the blood and grime of battle, but he stripped off his armor anyway before going inside his tent. Jon walked in to see Daenerys there by the lighted brazier, on her knees, a bucket of water before her and a dirtied cloth in her hands. The skin of her forearms and neck was red and raw from scrubbing. Her hair was held back in a rather haphazard, unceremonious looking single braid, some strands already coming loose to hang beside her face. Divested of her rigid cuirass and furs, he could see that there was something different about the shape of her; a fullness of her figure that was clear even beneath the simple woolen underdress.

She looked up at him as he came forward, getting down on his knees with her. He held his hand out for the cloth and she gave it to him, never taking her eyes off his face. Gently, he turned her head to the side and worked meticulously to get the spots she had missed; a swipe at her temple, a brush of her cheek, a slow, tender caress of the spot behind her ear, until all trace of the commander’s blood was gone, staining the cloth and the water but no longer marring her face.

“I could use a proper bath,” she murmured, looking down at herself.

“So could I,” he said, fingering through the loose tresses that had escaped her braid, pushing them back behind her ear. “I’m sure that can be arranged, once we’ve returned to the others.”

There was a silence between them, as neither one really knew what to say. All he wanted to do was drink in the sight of her and commit it to memory.

“Is it true?” he asked her quietly, hardly daring to utter the words. He had to hear it from her own lips. He had to know.

Daenerys looked at him, her expression hard to decipher. He thought he saw sorrow and regret in her eyes, but there was hope and love there as well. She wore everything plain on her face, a marked change in her, and she reached forward to take his hands in hers. He waited, breathless, for her answer.

“Yes,” she replied, barely more than a whisper. “Yes, it’s true. You’re to be a father, Jon Snow.”
Words he never thought he’d hear. Words that brought him such a great measure of overwhelming emotion; his heart pounding against his chest, his breaths short. He pulled her close and held her, kissing her fiercely, unable to really find the words he wanted, his mind still reeling.

“I wish you didn’t have to find out that way,” she whispered to him regretfully.

His hands were about her waist and he folded her into his lap. Yes, there it was; a distinct, noticeable change to her. He could feel it beneath his hands.

“How long?” he asked her, finally finding the ability to speak, his voice coming out cracked and hoarse. “When?”

She laid her head on his shoulder. “Sooner than you’re probably expecting,” she murmured quietly. “I’m almost embarrassed to admit how long it took me to realize.” She sighed, and he felt the warmth of her breath along his neck. “Do you remember that night in White Harbor?” She asked quietly. “The night you told me that you loved me?”

He stiffened in surprise. “That was almost five months ago,” he said, taken aback.

Daenerys lifted her head to smile down at him, a wry sort of expression that seemed to say *I know*. Her hands were on the side of his face and she kissed him. “Yes,” she replied. “And I do appreciate the irony of my insistence that you set me aside, considering the problem that I feared had already resolved itself.”

Everything that had happened to her since White Harbor flooded his mind. Last Hearth. Her illness. Winterfell...whatever had caused the deep gashes to her cuirass after. She had been with child through all of it. His heart pounded with fear.

And what further danger awaited her now?

She noticed the change and kissed him again. “Don’t think too hard about it,” she said, comfort and reassurance in her voice. “Please. The important thing is that I’m alright, and we’re together.”

“Yes,” he said, capturing her lips. “We’re together.”

One kiss turned into many as he became obsessed with the taste of her, trailing his mouth down her neck, grazing her skin with his teeth as she ran her fingers through his hair, pulling it with silent demand. She straddled his lap as he held her close, a quiet, murmuring moan sounding from low within her throat.

He felt her hands move to the hem of his shirt, her fingers exploring upward, cold on his skin. She was making efforts to remove it, and he pulled one hand from her body to still them. He leaned back to look at her, a hot desire in her eyes and her lips slightly swollen. Desire faded into concern as she met his eyes.

“Are you sure you want to see?” he asked quietly. He knew what sight awaited her.

She put a hand to his face and kissed him again. “You are my husband,” she said. “And I would not have you hide yourself from me.”

Heart pounding, he slowly released her other hand. She remained focused on him as she worked the ties of his shirt and slowly pulled it from him.

He kept his eyes on her face as she dropped the wool garment to the floor. Her expression hardened only slightly, not in horror but in anger.
After a moment she placed a steady hand over his heart, and the scar he bore there, without flinching.

“Does it hurt?” she asked him, concerned for him only.

He wondered whether or not to lie. The truth would pain her, he knew, but the words *I would not have you hide yourself from me* rang true within him. Who could he lean on to ease this burden if not his wife?

He swallowed, throat dry. “Yes,” he admitted to her, his voice a soft whisper. “It burns.” The pain he anticipated was clear on her face. He brought a hand up to cover hers as it continued to rest upon him. “But this helps.”

Her expression was indecipherable as she looked at their hands, and slowly she entwined their fingers together. Daenerys shifted in his arms, pressing her body closer against his. Without another word, she kissed him again, rough and demanding, catching his bottom lip between her teeth, her hands tightening against him. He could feel the hard press of each fingertip on his skin. He concentrated on that, and the feel of her astride him, losing himself in an entirely different sort of burn.

It was a quick affair, an attempt on both of their parts for the feeling of normalcy, for reassurance that they held the other there, alive and whole. He focused on her hands as they ran tenderly along the skin of his back, unafraid and undeterred by the rough, angry scar that cut its way across his shoulder blade. They didn’t make it to the furs of his bed, nor did they really have the time or presence of mind to fully undress. Neither one was interested in the act being particularly slow and loving. This was not the moment. Daenerys grabbed at him just as roughly as he did with her, kisses hard and bruising, her breaths hot and gasping in his ear.

Jon was desperate for the comfort of his wife’s embrace. She made him feel like himself. Holding her, kissing her, being inside her; in each touch he felt a glimmer of the man he used to be.

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**Sansa**

Harrenhal looked more sinister and ruinous than she imagined it would. The melted towers rose high before her, silhouetted by the moonlight and the clear sky, the forms eerie and misshapen. She commented as such to Brienne.

“It’s not much better in daylight, my Lady,” Brienne said in response.

“You’ve been here before?”

“I have.”

She didn’t elaborate, and Sansa didn’t press her to do so. Whatever it was likely did not hold pleasant memories. She couldn’t imagine any other such things happening in such a place as this.

She ached for her home. It was a deep, gaping wound in her chest to think of it. Jon said it had been completely destroyed. It terrified her to think of what manner of evil could bring down the round towers of the Great Keep, or breach the thick, double layered walls not once but *three times*.

If Winterfell could not stand against the dead, how could any other place hope to do so?
Sansa looked up again at the misshapen spires. How long would it take for this place to fall as well?

The sound of a horse approaching from behind pulled her from her spiraling mood, and she turned to see Theon guiding his horse up next to hers.

“Your brother asked to see you,” he said.

She turned her horse to follow in wordless acknowledgement, and they proceeded back down the road in silence.

The wagon that held her brother lay back behind them some length, but it wasn’t long until she saw the familiar shape of Sam Tarly at the seat, reins in hand. He greeted her with a smile, which hopefully meant her brother was about to give her good news.

Bran sat in the back, his chair tied down securely against one side and furs wrapped around him against the cold. She brought her horse around so she could be up next to him, the height of the wagon and his chair making it so his face was level with hers.

“Jon was able to take Maidenpool,” he said. “Arya and Daenerys are alive and safe. They will catch up to us soon.”

Sansa let out a long breath, the weight of her fears releasing the pressure they had been creating in her chest. “That’s good to hear,” she replied, relieved.

“I wanted to tell you as soon as I knew,” Bran said.

She reached out to place a hand on his arm. “Thank you,” she said, gratefully. “I’m sure the others will be glad to hear of it as well.”

“I know you worry. I can see it in your face. It reminds me of Mother.” Bran regarded her for a long moment, and it almost seemed as if there was a ghost of an expression there; a glimmer of something that could have been the old Bran and the little boy he used to be. The little boy who liked to climb and chase and explore.

After a bit he turned away, and the expression was gone. He looked down to his other side, and Sansa followed his gaze to the man that lay there.

She had assumed Gendry was a Wildling based on his manner of dress and Jon’s mention of him being at Eastwatch. However, she had come to find out from Ser Davos that he was not in fact, a Wildling at all but a blacksmith from King’s Landing. A curious thing, for him to end up a friend of Jon’s.

The man had been near death when Jon had brought him to their camp near the Trident and she had been pretty sure that he’d not live much longer than that. He had yet to awaken, but Sam was confident he would recover. Ser Davos had spent as much time as he could watching over him, the furrows on his brow deep with sad concern and worry the longer Gendry remained unconscious.

“Is he getting any better?” Sansa asked.

Bran was quiet. “I think so,” he said. “I noticed that his breathing has been getting easier.”

Another relief. “Well that’s another bit of good news,” she said. “I don’t think Jon would want to return only to see that his friend had died.”

There was a pause. “Nor would Arya, I think,” Bran said.
Sansa narrowed her eyes at him suspiciously. “Have you been looking into his life?” she asked, frowning with disapproval.

Her little brother was unaffected. “I was curious.”

“I assume it was to make sure he really was who Ser Davos said he was?” she asked archly. His casual attitude towards such invasiveness made her supremely uncomfortable, despite his assurances that he would never look into her life without her permission.

“Yes.”

“And?”

“He really is a smith from King's Landing.”

“I’m so glad you confirmed that for us.”

Bran either ignored her sarcasm or didn’t care enough to register it. He turned away from Gendry to look back at her again. “He’s a good man.”

She sighed. “How about you let him prove that to us himself when he wakes up?” she said. There was a difference between knowing the secrets of your enemies, and this. If Jon trusted him, if Ser Davos trusted him, if Jorah Mormont and Bran could both remark on separate occasions that he was a good man with utmost sincerity, then she would accept that and believe it.

Theon started suddenly on his horse, eyes wide, swearing under his breath with sharp surprise. Sansa turned to look at what he’d spotted and was greeted with the familiar form of Ghost within the trees, half invisible by the snow around him.

“Ghost,” she called out, beckoning him towards her. She was relieved and happy to see him. “Where have you been?” She had missed the wolf’s calm, steady presence. He’d been close by ever since she had reunited with Jon at Castle Black, and for him to be elsewhere for so long had added to her grief.

The direwolf didn’t move, merely turning his head to look at some spot behind him.

“That can’t be Ghost,” Theon said, looking between her and Bran, still with a hint of wary surprise. “He’s nearly the size of a horse-“

“ That ones yours, Snow,” Bran said, and Theon’s face went from wary to chagrined.

“I did say that, didn’t I?” he said quietly, and Sansa couldn’t tell if he was forlorn for the words or for the simpler times long past.

Sansa remembered only that Robb had handed her a puppy, so small and soft, and she had fallen in love with it in an instant.

What would her life had been like if Lady had lived?

Ghost let out a low howl; a rare thing for the usually silent animal, and it was soon obvious why. As it turned out, Ghost was bringing people along with him. Wildlings and Riverlands smallfolk, near fifty of them, emerged from the trees.

Harrenhal was just as forbidding from within than it was on approach; bodies of people long dead
had lain in it, abandoned by whomever had occupied the castle last. It had once been awarded to Littlefinger, she remembered, and it was clear he had not been much invested in restoring it to any sort of habitability.

“We should put people to work making repairs who are able to do so,” she told Tyrion as they stood in the dilapidated Great Hall. This room and the keep immediately surrounding it had seen some manner of liveable repairs, but the rest of the enormous castle had been left to weather and to ruin. “The more we can shelter inside the walls, the better.”

“A good idea, my Lady,” Ser Davos added in concurrence. “Idle hands and idle time is the quickest path to the sort of talk we don’t want brewing.”

“I agree, in part,” Tyrion replied. “But do you think it’s worth it to repair non-essential structure?” The question was phrased delicately to ensure that she knew his opinion on the matter before giving her answer.

Jon had left her in charge in his absence, and had been both vocal and clear to those present that he had done so. Everyone seemed to take her temporary command in stride, though it was clear to her that while Tyrion respected the decision, he felt his personal experience lent him greater credence regarding decision making and phrased much of his advice with some manner of mild condescension.

She was content to let him continue to do so, for now. He’d not made any attempts thus far to ignore or discount her opinions, but since his grief-stricken outburst at Moat Cailin she had kept a decidedly closer mind to his words and actions.

Sansa sighed, looking up at the roof, darkened by shadow as the light of the many hearths flickered on the stone. “I think so, yes,” she answered finally. “We may be in this castle for some time, so we might as well get what use out of it that we can.” She turned to Ser Jorah. “And what of the Dothraki?”

“They will camp outside the walls,” he replied. “They prefer it.”

If he was displeased at Jon leaving him behind with her, the older man did not show it. Jon’s reasoning had been sound; the Dothraki would be all but useless in a castle siege, and Jorah was the only one who spoke and understood Dothraki well enough for Jon’s comfort to keep them in hand.

“And how do they fair otherwise?”

“Sickness claimed a few more on the road,” Jorah said. The deep cut across his eye made him look sinister and foreboding. “They will be burned with the others.”

Footsteps echoed across the nearly empty room, and she turned to see Sam Tarly coming forward.

“I’m sorry to interrupt,” he said apologetically. “But I thought you might like to know that he has woken up. Gendry, I mean.”

“And he is well?” she inquired.

“As well as can be, I suppose. It will be a long while before he’s fully recovered, but I do expect he will do so.”

She heard a sigh of relief from Ser Davos, and she turned to him. “Go and sit with him if you’d like, Ser Davos,” she said kindly. “We are finished here.”
“Many thanks, my Lady.”

He departed, and she addressed Sam again. “Any further news from my brother?”

Tyrion and Jorah both regard him in earnest, clearly anxious for news of the queen.

“Bran confirms they are on their way back to Harrenhal,” he said. “The queen and Arya Stark were recovered, and Maidenpool was, ah...burnt to the ground.”

Sansa kept her face flat and unresponsive. Bran had left the state of Maidenpool out of his earlier conversation with her. Though Jon had intended to only liberate the city for his own use, she had a hard time finding fault with the end result.

Cersei wasn’t going to show any mercy to them, so why should he?

Jorah seemed to be of the same mind, though Tyrion, unsurprisingly, clearly had a different opinion. The queen’s Hand frowned deeply at the news, but made no comment as to his thoughts.

The moon had risen and set twice before a rider from Jon appeared at the gate, bearing a letter that held the same news that Bran had shared with them upon their arrival. As was typical of Jon, it was short and held no information that he did not deem necessary to include. No details of Arya or how she was, what loss of life the battle had cost, or the shape of the forces that he had used. Just two lines confirming the outcome written in his steady, practical hand, and unsigned. He had mentioned, however, that it was wildfire that had leveled Maidenpool, and was clear to instruct her to have Harrenhal thoroughly searched before occupation.

Sansa had acted immediately upon receipt of this warning. So far no sign of wildfire had been found near the main keep, but Harrenhal was extensive and it would take time yet before they had searched enough for her to be comfortable allowing the settlement of the rest. She sighed and set the parchment down on the furs beside her.

Now, she sat in a room on the second level that she had decided to claim for herself. Her trunk of things was pushed up against the wall and opened. The cot and furs she had slept on during the long march had been brought up for her, and a single chair, long since left to sit abandoned in this empty room, sat near the hearth. It was meager surroundings compared to her parents’ room at Winterfell, but she was grateful that she could sleep without the sound of endlessly flapping tents and the occasional burst of cold wind that would leech through the seams.

Across the room, she had set another cot and furs for Arya, and hoped that she would agree to stay with her. They had shared their parents’ room in the weeks leading up to the Winterfell battle, and Sansa found she rather missed her sister’s company at night.

Sansa stood and smoothed out the creases on her dress. She walked to the door in four quick steps and opened it, stepping back in mild surprise to see Brienne there, hand raised in an attempt to knock.

Her sworn sword recovered quickly. “I came to see if you wanted to greet your brother in the yard,” Brienne said. “Others have begun to gather.”

She stepped out of her room and closed the door with a decisive snap. “Yes, I would,” she replied, and the two of them proceeded through hall and down the stairs.
It was hard for her to remain calm as they approached Harrenhal. She fidgeted with the horn of her saddle to distract herself from her thoughts, wild as they were with memories and with emotions.

Finding out that Gendry was alive had been both a relief and a burden; Jon had said to her and Edd that he had found him at the Crossroads, the only survivor of the attack. He had been alive when Jon had left him, though she could tell from his tone as he spoke that he was unsure whether or not he would still be alive when they returned.

She asked nothing else about it, nor was she interested in speaking more on the subject. Edd was the only one who knew that she and Gendry had some manner of deeper understanding that lay beyond friendship, though she suspected Daenerys had guessed at it as well. However, the queen knew her enough to say nothing to her about it, and Arya was grateful for this. She didn't want to deal with it right now. She didn't want Jon and the others poking at her about it, especially if it turned out that Gendry had died. She didn't need the sorrowful, pitying looks that would earn her.

The thought clenched hard in her heart, and she was determined to put an end to every Golden Company archer she came across. For Gendry, and for Hot Pie.

Torches lined the walls ahead, lighting up the lower parts of the great castle in the darkness. She nudged her horse on a bit to bring herself even with Jon.

Her brother looked at her briefly, and she could almost see a bit of amusement flash across his face at her impatience. “Go on then,” he said to her, reading her mind.

Arya grinned at him before urging her horse forward even more, galloping fast up to the gate that was already open for them. The courtyard was already crowded with people waiting and several called out to her as she was recognized, but she only searched for her sister.

Sansa stood at the top of the steps, Brienne on one side and Tyrion on the other. Arya leapt from her horse and threw herself up the stairs two at a time, embracing Sansa with everything she had.

“I missed you,” Arya said as her sister held her tight.

“I am relieved you are alive,” Sansa replied as she broke apart. “Where are the others?”

“Jon and Daenerys are right behind me,” she said, both for Sansa’s benefit and for Tyrion beside her. “I had to ride ahead. I couldn’t wait.”

Sansa gave her an amused smile. “And everyone is well?”

“Yes.” She looked around. “Where is Bran?”

“He’s in the Hall.”

She wanted to ask about Gendry too, but she also wasn’t sure if she was prepared to hear the answer if it was bad news. She decided to keep the question to herself for now.

“I’ll take you to him,” Sansa offered, turning slightly to lead her away. She had noticed the fleeting change in her and misinterpreted.
“You don’t want to wait for Jon?” Arya asked.

“He’ll know where to find me.” It was a subtle instruction to Tyrion, who acknowledged it with a nod of his head.

Sansa led her through the courtyard and to the large set of wooden doors. Arya remembered this route, the path she would take through the halls as she waited on Tywin Lannister. It was almost surreal to walk it with her sister at her side, unafraid and free.

Brienne pushed the doors open for them, and she was greeted with the sight of five people together near the closest hearth. They all looked up at the sight of them, the low murmur of conversation ceasing in surprise.

Bran was there, and Sam, with Theon standing close by. Ser Davos sat across from them, and, to her great joy and relief, so did Gendry. He was propped up in low-backed chair, his face pale and bearing strained. He was clearly still hurt, but he was upright, and he was alive.

She took a step forward, and then another, and soon she was covering the distance between them as quick as she could, desperate to touch him and confirm that he was, in fact, there.

Gendry was just as relieved to see her, and it was plain on his face as she approached. He sat up straighter as she embraced him. “Ow,” he murmured as she did so, a good-natured request to tell her to take it easy. His voice was hoarse and quiet, but his embrace was comforting. She lingered in it as long as she dared before it would raise questions. She could see that he was reluctant to let her go.

They needed to talk first, and that could wait for a time when they could be alone.

Later, after all the noise and fuss of their return had somewhat settled, Arya sat in a small room with her sister. It had clearly been prepared for the both of them, and Arya was grateful for walls and a bed that was not on the ground.

Sansa sat on her own cot, dressed for sleep, pulling a comb through her own hair with long thoughtful strokes.

“I can’t believe Jon is going to be a father,” Sansa said into the quiet that had settled between them.

“That’s usually what happens when people marry,” Arya pointed out. “Though I think Jon may have gotten started on that a bit earlier than is proper.”

“Don’t be crude.”

“Oh please, like you didn’t already know.”

Sansa rolled her eyes as Arya began to unlace her boots, but then she faded into a frowning melancholy. “I think Jon knew about it,” she said quietly. “The child.”

Arya looked up at her. “How can that be? Daenerys herself didn’t even know until after he had...” She trailed off, not quite strong enough to say the word even though she had just seen him an hour ago, alive and well.

Sansa stared contemplatively into the fire. “I’m just remembering some of the things that he said,”
she murmured. “I think he knew, and mourned for them both.” She has a hard set to her jaw. “I’m surprised he didn’t kill every single man in the Golden Company himself,” she said, a fierce note to her tone.

Arya was of much the same mind. “He certainly tried,” she said, remembering how Jon had looked when she saw him at Maidenpool. Covered in blood that was not his own, eyes full of rage and anger, a dark brutality in him that she’d never seen before. “I think he would have, if given the time and opportunity, and no one would fault him for it.”

They fell into silence as Arya readied herself for bed. She borrowed Sansa’s comb to brush out her own hair, longer now and increasingly more annoying in its length. She was greatly tempted to shear it short again out of practicality, but Gendry has said once that he liked it this way, and she was mildly interested in exploring that further.

As she made to return the comb, her eyes settled upon her sword belt as it lay hanging across the back of the chair, and she remembered something important.

She padded forward across the stone and pulled open the small pocket that was attached to the belt, filled with a handful of useless coins, a fire starter, and the little wooden figure of a horse, the edges worn smooth.

Arya clasped her fingers tightly around it and turned to face Sansa, who looked at her with a mild curiosity.

“I have something for you,” Arya told her, walking forward and holding it out for her to see.

Sansa stared at it, disbelief on her face, and did not say a word.

“You know you can’t play the game without this, right?” Arya teased gently, hoping to smooth over the difficult emotions that surfaced. “Probably best not to leave it lying around.”

Sansa blinked fast in a clear attempt to keep her tears at bay as she reached forward, slowly, to take the game piece from her.

“I have it with me,” she murmured finally, looking at the little horse. “The game. Would you like to play?”

Arya grinned at her. “Of course I would.”
now everyone is officially all together in the same place. yay!

we're going to have a couple quiet chapters of character interaction coming up before I start moving in towards the finale. I'm estimating that this story will end up totaling about 45ish chapters. If there are some important character moments you think have been glossed over or are in need of more attention, definitely say something because now is the time for me to fit that in if I've missed it

as always, let me know what you think.
Arya dreams of death. Jon undertakes a journey at Bran’s request.

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

Arya

In her dreams, she heard screaming.

There was fire all around her. The warmth of the blood of others coated her skin. She ran through halls that looked like home; stone walls and sturdy oak doors passing by her as she fled, her breath tearing through her chest.

She burst through a door and suddenly she was at the Crossroads, the Inn burning ahead of her and lighting up the night. She stumbled forward through the smoke, moving painfully slow as if her legs were stuck in mud. She stumbled over a body and saw that it was Sansa lying there, blood staining her skin where her throat was cut, her eyes clouded, the red of her hair a bright contrast to the snow beneath.

Arya called her name, but no sound came out. She tried to reach for her, but Sansa always remained just beyond her grasp. Tears stung at her eyes as she clawed at the ground.

“Arya, run!”

She turned to see Gendry sprinting for her. He stretched out his hand to help her to her feet, but as she stood he was felled by arrows, staggering backwards. She watched in horror as he collapsed, staring at her in confusion and shock.

“Why?” he asked her, his voice layered with grief, eyes wide with the pain of betrayal. “I just wanted to help you.”

She looked down and saw her hands holding a bow.

“It wasn’t me!” she tried to say, heartbroken, but still she could not speak. “I didn’t do this!”

The sounds of fighting clashed around her. She kept running, not sure where she was or what she was running to, just knowing that she had to get out. She had to get away. Fear coursed through her with every step like her blood had somehow turned to fire, burning her from the inside out.

She tripped and landed hard, her hands and knees skidding on the muddy ground. She tried to rise, but each movement seemed to take years to complete, slow and painstaking as she tried to push
herself up, arms shaking as if she were trying to lift a hundred horses.

Jon was knelt on the ground before her, slouched and defeated. He held a limp and bloodied Daenerys in his arms.

The queen was dead, her grey cloak stained dark, the shining hilt of Longclaw sticking up sharply, sunk deep in her chest. The white hilt gleamed menacingly in the fire.

Her brother looked up at her, a soulless grief in his eyes. “It was supposed to be me,” he said to her. “How could you let this happen?”

Arya tried to reach for him, tears welling in her eyes and blurring her vision. “I tried,” she said, choking on the words. “I’m sorry-“

Flames began to surround him, but he did not react. Arya tried to grasp his arm, to save him from the fire, but Jon did not move. “It was supposed to be me,” he said again. Arya watched in horror as he let the fire consume him.

Her eyes snapped open as her heart pounded in her ears and her chest. The room briefly heightened her fear with its unfamiliarity, but soon her eyes adjusted and her mind began to remember what was real and what was not.

She threw the furs from her, feeling flushed and troubled from the nightmare, the hair on the back of her neck sticky with sweat. She sat up and tried to take deep breaths, staring at the other side of the small room where her sister lay, asleep and very much alive. Arya watched her chest rise and fall softly in the dim firelight, using each breath as further reassurance that Sansa was safe and whole.

Her hands tightened around the side of her cot with a white knuckled grip as she swung her legs over one side, the stones cool against her feet. She took a few more deep breaths as she tried to calm herself. She couldn’t have been asleep more than a few hours. This part of the castle was quiet; a bit removed from the crowded chaos that was the main keep and courtyard. Many had taken up residence in as much of the melted towers as was possible, but many still were sheltered in tents as repairs to the rest of it were begun. It had been Sansa’s idea to do so, and her sister had spent much time organizing those efforts with Ser Davos and Tyrion.

With a sigh and a sweep of her hand to brush the hair from her face, Arya rose quietly from her bed and began to dress. The moon had come and gone four times since she had arrived at Harrenhal, and she was struggling to find her place.

At Winterfell it had been easy. It was her home, a place she knew and loved, and her position and responsibilities were clear. Here, everything was strange and unfamiliar. Riverlanders and Wildlings worked together, Northmen took orders from Jaime Lannister without complaint, and, above them all, a stranger in her brother’s image that wore a red cloak and spoke Dothraki as if it he’d done so all his life.

Further to that, it was all taking place in the ruins of a castle in which she had once been held as a prisoner, forced to watch others be tortured and killed.

And then there was Gendry.

They hadn’t seen much of each other in the time since they’d reunited. A lot of it was due to her desire to stay with Jon as much as he would allow, which often involved quite a bit of walking and riding and speaking with others for hours on end, all activities that Gendry could not, at the moment,
do. He could walk without aid, but she knew it pained him. She remembered how much blood had stained his coat as Daenerys held him up. She remembered the grief and distress on his face as the Golden Company dragged her away. She remembered him collapsing into the muddy snow as he tried to save her, his body lying next to Hot Pie, both of them still and unmoving as the Inn blazed into an inferno beside them.

The memory sent her briefly back to the horror of her nightmare, and she shook it away with a breath and a toss of her shoulders. Gendry was alive too, and he would be alright. She made the decision, at that moment, to go and see him. It was long overdue.

Her weapons she left behind, the belt slung across the back of the chair, the hilt of Needle glowing gold as it reflected the low fire in the hearth. She grabbed her cloak and fastened it about herself and grabbed her boots to pull on in the hall, not wanting to make too much noise.

She crept quietly down the hallway, careful to keep the sound of her steps to a minimum. The guards she passed merely noted her presence and said nothing; and the Unsullied outside the quarters her brother and Daenerys occupied did not even move.

Gendry was down the stairs and near the main Hall. Arya walked quietly down the empty hallway to the door she knew belong to him, and quietly, hesitantly, knocked. There was a brief moment of silence in which she wondered if he was still asleep, but then his voice called out from beyond the door.

“Come in.”

She grasped the cool metal handle and opened the door. The room was smaller than the one she shared with Sansa, and lit dimly by the light of the fire in the hearth. Gendry was sitting up on the edge of his bed, mostly dressed, struggling with some difficulty on the ties of the black wool shirt. She let out a quiet sigh of relief, leaning back against the door as she did so, the latch clicking into place quietly behind her.

He looked up at her in mild surprise, clearly expecting someone else. Ser Davos, most likely, would be her guess.

“You’re up early,” he murmured.

“So are you.”

Gendry focused on her with a quiet intensity. “People keep telling me to rest all the time,” he said. “I’m pretty over it.”

Arya walked over to the bed and sat down beside him, taking control of the ties and doing them up for him without a word. She closed up the shirt, a hint of linen bandage peeking out from beneath. Her fingers brushed against his skin as she tied the laces with a simple knot. When she was done, she brushed her hand flat along the fabric, smoothing it out across his chest in a gentle, sweeping motion.

He caught her hand in his, the grasp firm, as if he was afraid she would pull away. “I feel like it’s been ages since I’ve seen you,” he said quietly. It was a simple observation, but there was a question there as well. A slight tilt to the tone of his voice that held another emotion.

Sadness.

Arya felt guilty for not having come to him sooner, and as she met his gaze she wore that guilt plain on her face. “I’m sorry,” she whispered. “I wish I had a good reason for it, but I don’t.”
Gendry’s hand moved along her arm, traveling slowly upward to her shoulder and neck until she felt the rough pad of his thumb across her cheek. The cut and bruise she’d earned from her fight with the Golden Company guard had mostly healed by now, and all that remained was a thin red line across her cheekbone.

She allowed herself to lean into his hand, taking comfort from the pressure and warmth of it against her face. “I thought I would never see you again,” she whispered, her emotions getting the best of her now. “I thought we would arrive and I would be told that you were dead.”

His eyes were a soft, understanding sympathy. “We’re both still here,” he murmured. It was an assurance to both her and to himself.

Arya let out a sigh, and pulled back a bit. His hand fell from her face, but she took it within hers and entwined their fingers together. “Will you take a walk with me?” she asked him.

A half smile lifted the corner of his mouth. “Depends,” he said. “Does it involve stairs?”

She smiled a bit in return. “It doesn’t have to,” she replied. “I had no particular destination in mind.”

She rose from the bed and offered him a hand.

They walked for some time in silence, striding close beside each other but not quite touching. The castle was crowded and full of people, though the grounds were quieter. She let her feet take her to where the Wildlings had set up their camp; filled with both those that had fought at Winterfell and those that had traveled with the Night’s Watch from beyond the Wall. She found herself often in their company; finding comfort in the familiar faces and the relative anonymity that their way of life provided. No one here cared that her brother was a king, or that she was supposed to be a Lady. Here she was just Arya, and nothing else really mattered.

The pace of their steps was slow, for Gendry’s sake, and she could tell he was trying not to let his limp show too noticeably. She debated with herself on whether or not to offer support; would he want her to help him? Did he need it and was too stubborn to say anything? Or was he truly handling himself fine, and the limp was only a minor effect?

What did he expect her to do?

Suddenly she was nervous about her actions. Were they nothing but friends, the problem would have been easier to solve. She knew where she stood with him when they had been traveling on the road.

Now, everything was strange. Things were different. There was something more than friendship between the two of them and it was new and hard to wrap her mind around. Arya didn’t know how to act. She wasn’t sure what he expected of her now that they had the beginnings of some sort of understanding. They’d not had the chance to talk about it before they were attacked, and then since then she’d spent her time unconsciously avoiding the conversation, afraid that it had all been damaged irreparably before it had really even begun.

Gendry stopped walking as they approached a bit of awning, part of it fenced off. It held dragonglass and other weapons now, but as she stared at the place she began to recognize it for what it used to be.

“It’s strange to be here,” Gendry murmured, looking at it with a bit of a hard frown. “Like some sort of uncomfortable dream.”

Arya remembered standing on the other side of that fence, Gendry beside her, heart pounding in fear
as the Mountain stared them down. With a shudder and a sigh, she turned away from it. “We’re not prisoners this time,” she replied, pushing herself up to perch on the wooden railing. Her face was level with his as he stood close beside her, leaning on the fence for support. He looked into the enclosure for a long moment, a furrow between his brows and a hard set to his jaw, but slowly he turned his head to regard her, straightening up to meet her eyes.

“No,” he concurred quietly. “We aren’t.” She watched his breath fog in the air between them. The moonlight made his skin look paler and his hair darker. She resisted the urge to brush it away from his face. “Will you tell me what’s wrong?” he asked her.

She felt herself naked under his scrutiny, and barely suppressed the instinct to squirm away from it. “I don’t want you to die,” she whispered, a pleading tone to her voice. She felt vulnerable and exposed, like she was in the midst of a battle wearing nothing but a silk dress. Her heart was in her hands and she held it out for him to take.

He did not respond to her fear by trying to comfort her with false promises of survival. Gendry knew her better than that. Instead he moved closer, a hand reaching out to snake about her waist, what little distance there had been between them now disappeared. They were out of sight of most others, and though the Wildlings would likely not give them a second glance, anyone else who happened upon them would know what they saw.

Arya finally succumbed to her earlier desire and slowly brushed his hair back away from his face, her fingers lingering on the back of his head and neck. His eyes flicked down to her mouth and then back up to hers, betraying his intent only a moment before his action. Gendry slowly closed the space between them and kissed her, capturing her lips with a sweet determination. His arm about her kept her secure and steady in her position atop the fence. She kissed him in return, long overdue. She let herself fall into the way he tasted, the soft scratch of his beard on her face, the pull from deep within that begged to feel his hands on her. She tried to commit it all to memory as best she could.

They were both breathless when they finally broke apart, her heart pounding and her mind a whirlwind. Arya kept her hands upon him, one hand coming to rest against the smooth leather of his longcoat, directly over his heart. She took a moment to linger in the feeling of his chest rising and falling beneath her touch, steady and even.

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**Jon**

He stood on the wharf and stared out at the cold blackness that was the God’s Eye lake. Freezing wind whipped at his cloak and hair, and the sound of crackling ice sounded muffled and dim beneath the wooden planks at his feet. The lake itself was restless under the wind that howled across it and had not stilled enough to freeze more than a cart’s length from the shore. The water was dark and endless, and looking at it gave him an uneasy feeling.

“Are you sure about this?” he asked Bran.

“Yes,” his brother said. “We have to go.”

Jon looked down at him. “You heard the stories same as I,” he said. “Those who have attempted to sail to that island have not returned.”
Bran looked up at him with a piercing, unblinking stare. “Do you trust me?” he asked.

“Do I have a choice?”

His brother was silent for a long time. “I don’t think so,” he said finally. The words seemed to echo over the lake with a quiet chill.

He let out a breath with a heavy sigh; the air pushed out in a noticeable fog. “How long?” he asked Theon, calling out to him. The man he’d once considered a brother stood in a boat with one sail, checking it for readiness, his face in a concentrated frown.

Theon looked up at him. “An hour, at most,” he replied.

This particular boat had been beached on the shore when they had arrived at Harrenhal near on a month past, along with several others in lesser condition. Jon had started to order it stripped for materials before Bran rather cryptically informed him that it was needed and should be repaired instead. It had taken quite a while to get the vessel into sailing shape; a number of pieces needed to be refashioned and those who worked on it had often needed to be creative with their materials. All in all, he was struggling to find confidence in the boat itself, despite assurances and the faith he had in his own men. He didn’t feel much like testing the limits of his swimming abilities.

A while later, Sam and Theon began to carry first Bran, and then his chair, into the boat to settle him in for the journey. The Hound and Edd had also volunteered to go with them, and they were occupied loading some supplies.

Jon heard her footsteps on the dock before she spoke, and he turned to see Daenerys approaching.

“Arya is on her way,” she said, Ghost at her side like a white shadow. “She is stopping by the forges first.”

“Is this her way of telling me she’d like to be an armorer’s apprentice?” He pet the fur atop Ghost’s head almost absentmindedly.

Daenerys answered with an amused expression. “It’s certainly a way of telling you something,” she replied.

Jon was not blind to the reason for Arya’s sudden interest in smithing. He tried not to think about it too much, aside from the one inquiry he’d made to Daenerys to confirm if there was, in fact, something to know or if he was letting Ser Davos and his sly comments get too much into his head. He’d not said anything to Arya about it directly, nor did he really intend to, hoping instead that she would be the one to disclose it. So far, however, his sister seemed to be content to keep things to herself and he supposed he could sympathize with that.

“How long do you think you’ll be gone?” Daenerys asked him. He could hear the uncertainty in her voice. The idea of separation, as brief as this would hopefully be, did not appeal to either of them.

“We’ll return shortly,” he promised to her, and to himself.

She looked to the boat, and then to the darkness of the water ahead. “I hope Bran finds what he is looking for,” she replied.

“So do I.” He trusted his brother, but he hated the fact that there was so much about this journey that was unknown. Jon was about to comment on it further, but he saw a flicker of an uncomfortable frown dash across his wife's face. “What is it?” he asked her, concerned.
She let out a breath and reached out to take his hands in hers, looking up at him with a small smile. “I’m alright,” she assured. “Your daughter is restless.”

He couldn’t stop the grin spreading across his face. “So sure of a daughter then, are you?” he asked.

“I have had dreams,” Daenerys answered. “Dreams of a little girl with dark hair.” She moved to place a hand sweetly upon his face and smiled. “Dark hair and a serious face, just like yours.”

Her hand was warm against his cheek, and he turned to brush a kiss to it. “You don’t think she would look more like you?” he asked softly.

“She will be born in the depths of winter, in a castle filled with Northerners,” she pointed out. “I think it would be fitting if she had the likeness of her Northern father as well.”

They pushed off from the wharf a short time later. The water rippled before them and the broken ice crackled against the hull of the boat. Theon let down the small sail to billow outwards as it caught the wind. Jon took a seat near the bow, turning back only once to watch the pale glimmer of silver hair fade into the night.

Arya sat across from him, looking ahead of them instead. The wind tossed her hair back away from her face, long and unruly. She had a scar through one eyebrow from the battle at Winterfell and the beginnings of another across her cheek. They made her look older than her years, and more hardened that he ever wished her to be. Jon wondered if his own scars had the same effect. All they ever did for him was remind him of how much of his life he’d spent fighting.

His sister caught him staring at her and she frowned. “What?” she questioned.


The deferral was not bought, and he could see the suspicion plain on her face, but she let it be. Her breath fogged in the air before her as she slouched against the railing as he did, returning her gaze to the darkness ahead. He let his mind wander where it will, thoughts mixing between hopeful imaginings of a daughter and the various political problems that had plagued him since Castle Cerwyn.

The North, and most of the Riverlands, were desolate, destroyed kingdoms. Winterfell was gone. A letter from Missandei had told a story of White Harbor, sieged by the dead. Some had escaped on ships and fled for Dragonstone, but not enough. Only one of Lord Manderly’s granddaughters had made the journey; the eldest one had stayed behind to orchestrate the defense of the city in an effort to buy time for as many to escape as possible.

The older lord had grieved for his granddaughter and his people, and the North had grieved with him. A pyre was burned in their honor, empty save for a single wooden shield that bore the Manderly crest.

There was still no sign of the dead past the Neck; though Sansa had written to Robin Arryn in an attempt to engage him as an ally, hoping for his support, or at least for him to keep watch on his own borders. According to Varys, the unrest and civil war in Dorne was coming to a conclusion. There was now a clear frontrunner, and the spymaster was sending correspondence often to Tyrion about it.

The small boat rocked a bit beneath them, and unconsciously he tightened his grip on the edge of the crate he sat upon. Jon turned back to look at Theon, who quietly directed Edd to adjust the sail.
Arya seemed undisturbed by the motion, and continued staring forward into the darkness ahead. The moon had yet to rise, and the clouds hid most of the starlight. All he could see was the small waves of the lake stretching endlessly before them.

An hour passed in silence, and then most of another. He didn’t realize he’d drifted off into a half-doze until Arya sharply said his name. Jon snapped his eyes open to see her standing up and looking back to Bran quickly before whipping her head around again. He sat up fast and followed her gaze, the torchlight on the prow striking shadows across his face and emphasizing her concerned expression.

They were coming up on a wall of mist so dense as to seem impenetrable.

“We’re almost there,” Bran said. “Straight ahead.”

“We’ll lose our bearing going in that,” Theon cautioned quietly. “Straight ahead means nothing if you can’t see where you’re going.” He held the rudder of the boat with an iron grip, looking to Jon for instruction.

Jon, in turn, looked to Bran. “I am not interested in getting lost in this,” he said quietly.

Bran’s face was frustratingly impassive. “We’ll make it through.”

He turned to watch as the wall of mist and fog drew steadily closer. Arya was stiff and still next to him. Theon squared his shoulders and tightened his grasp. The mist began to consume the area around the boat. Visibility was gone in moments. Jon felt his heart beat hard against his chest. No one spoke, and no sounds were heard other than the soft splashing of waves as they cut through the water, but even that was muted. The wind was almost nonexistent, and the boat moved slowly. It seemed as if they were suspended in horrifying, oppressive nothingness. He hardly dared to breathe.

After what felt like an eternity, the mist around them then began to shine with a strange light, growing brighter and brighter as they pushed forward. Arya scrambled to the very edge of the little boat, her face one of incredulous disbelief, and it took Jon a moment to realize that he was seeing her in a light so bright now that the torch wasn’t even necessary. The mist began to slowly lessen as the light grew, and then, slowly, it disappeared entirely.

The warmth of the sun hit his face and his skin and he shielded his eyes, so used to the constant darkness that it took a long time for him to adjust well enough to see anything besides a blinding brightness.

“Seven Hells,” Edd murmured in shock.

Jon blinked and squinted before them, a hand still held up to shade his eyes, hardly able to believe what he saw. A large island jutted out of the water before them, green and covered in tall trees, all of them lush and full like it was the prime of summer.

It was as if they had stepped into a dream.

He couldn’t stop staring, wondering if it was some sort of dazed conjuring of his mind, or if he would blink and find out that was still asleep, waking again to the harsh darkness and the cold of the lake. Yet the closer they sailed, the clearer the island became. A slice of summer, unaffected by the changes in the world.

Arya turned back to look at him, mirroring his expression of incredulity.

Jon ripped off his gloves to feel the warmth on his hands, noticing how pale his skin had become. He
wondered idly if he might burst into flame. The prow of the boat sluiced through clear blue water instead of black. The breeze that carried them forward was warm and soft.

The sand crunched under the hull of the boat as it slid onto the beach, and again beneath his boots as he pulled himself up over the side to help push it up further from the water. Jon inhaled deeply, thrilled to be smelling trees and grass and flowers instead of ash and death.

“How is this possible?” Theon asked aloud, more a rhetorical wondering to himself than expecting any sort of actual answer.

Jon turned to look at Bran, who was staring fixedly off into the trees just ahead. He was the least affected of any of them, and appeared to care little for the miracle they were witnessing. “Do you see the path?” Bran asked, ignoring Theon’s question, looking to Jon as he pointed.

He followed his brother’s indication. Sure enough, a pale, winding line cut ahead of them through the grass to disappear into the forest.

“What’s at the end of it?” he asked.

“Answers, I hope,” Bran replied.

As it turned out, the end of it was actually a dense grove of weirwood trees. All of them were much larger and older than the one at Winterfell, or really any that Jon had ever seen. Each had a different face, and each was even larger than the last as they walked through them, with the path terminating at the foot of the grandest one; wide enough to encompass the entire boat they’d sailed here on and as tall the Great Keep had been.

The white bark of the trees seemed to glow orange in the setting sun.

“What is this place?” Arya asked, turning to look at Bran, who was the only one of their group not struck by the trees and their size.

“This is the Isle of Faces,” Bran said. “The home of the Children of the Forest.”

“The Children?” she repeated, disbelieving. “They’re not...here? Are they?”

“The last Children of the Forest were killed beyond the Wall by the Night King and his Army,” Bran said quietly. “This is the last source of their power in the world.” He looked ahead to the great tree in the center. “I need it to See.”

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**Edd**

After the destruction of Castle Black, and the subsequent headache of a journey that followed, Edd was quite content to never have the occasion walk anywhere again. He’d come on this mad sailing trip through to the God’s Eye specifically because it didn’t have the potential to include a lot of walking, and, well, Daenerys had asked him to go and he wasn’t about to refuse a queen’s request, nor was he going to let Jon Snow go on a ridiculous fool’s journey without someone there to remind him not to fling himself headfirst into danger.

Strangely enough, though, in the time since Jon had departed Castle Black himself it was clear that
the stubborn, rash Lord Commander had been replaced by someone else. Jon Snow the king was more deliberate and calculating in his actions. You would think a man that had died twice and then promptly recovered would be more foolhardy in his actions, given that the consequences weren’t permanent, but the experience seemed to have the opposite effect on Jon.

Or perhaps it was the wife and expected child that had done that instead.

Edd sighed and leaned back into the tree that he sat against, halfway through his watch. It was early morning now, and he could see hints of the sunrise through the tops of the trees. Bran Stark’s guidance yesterday had sent them on a long path through the forest that had lasted most of the day, culminating in the strange place they were now: a massive grove of weirwood trees.

He was currently leaning against the largest of them, about an arms length from where Bran had asked to be placed. The younger Stark was propped up in a place where the roots of the tree diverged and then dived back into the ground again, making it look like he sat upon an intentionally made wooden throne, his head back against the trunk and his eyes open and clouded white.

It was disturbing to look at.

“Has he come out of it yet?”

Edd turned to see Sam approaching him, rubbing sleep from his eyes and a book in his hand. He had been pleased to see him at Harrenhal; it had seemed like a lifetime ago that he had last seen him.

“No,” Edd replied. “I don’t think he even moved.”

Sam sat down on the grass in front of him, frowning in Bran’s direction. “He’s never been in this state for so long before,” he commented. “Usually only an hour or two at most. Any longer and I think it tires him too much.”

He didn’t know what to say to that, really. Edd was out of his depth with the weirwoods and the magic and the greensight, and elected to focus on the simpler things instead, like watch duty. He glanced out over the clearing again, seeing the shapes of the others as they lay spread out in the grass nearby. No one had felt the need to light a fire, and the warmth and relative seclusion of the island had caused them to remove most of the layered clothing they had arrived in. He couldn’t remember the last time he wore a shirt that wasn’t supplemented by three more coverings of wool and leather and fur.

Edd sighed and stood up, brushing dirt and bits of grass from his clothes. “I’m going to go take a walk,” he told Sam. “You have the-” he stopped himself from saying Wall out of force of habit. “You have the...tree,” he ended lamely, finding that the relief of this command didn’t seem to ring with quite the same authority.

“Aye, Lord Commander,” Sam replied quietly.

The Isle of Faces, as Bran had called it, was quiet and still and showed no signs that it had ever been inhabited by anyone. He walked through the grove and back into the normal trees without faces on them, and a deer darted out ahead of him in fright. Sunlight began to poke through the canopy of the forest, sparkling in the dewy grass below. He walked for near an hour as the sun rose, not sure what exactly made him so uneasy. It was peaceful here, and calm, and that was probably why Edd felt so strange and out of place. He’d spent most of his life in snow and ice; summer weather was as foreign to him now as a city in Essos would be.

“What are you doing?”
Unsurprisingly, Arya had found him. He sighed. “Can’t a man walk alone in a forest without being questioned?” he asked dryly.

“Definitely not,” she said with a glimmer of laughter. “I’m looking for Jon. Have you seen him?”

Edd frowned. “No. He’s not with the others?”

She shook her head and shrugged. “I think he’s walking about, same as you.”

“Go and bother him then. I think you and I have done enough walking together to last me the rest of my life.”

She rolled her eyes. "Fine. But I want to show you something first."

The enthusiasm in her tone made him feel like he should definitely be saying no to it, but he sighed and followed her anyway. Annoyingly, her path took them through dense trees and even denser underbrush, and Edd found himself wishing he’d put on his leathers if only to protect himself from the branches she flicked back on him in her haste to get to wherever she was going.

He nearly ran into the back of her when she stopped abruptly at the edge of some trees. “Look down there,” she whispered, pointing into a small valley below.

A round, black patch of burned ground and charred bone was there at the bottom, and in the center of it Edd saw the great body of a green-scaled dragon. His breath caught in his chest and he stared, wide-eyed, as the beast unfurled a wing, torn and tattered, to adjust its position. There were long gashes along the neck and body, beginning to scar where scales had been torn away. Gaps along the back and tail told the story of missing and damaged spines. It let out a low, keening sort of cry, and Edd watched as the dragon turned about in his blackened nest.

“It’s Rhaegal,” Arya said quietly. “He’s the last dragon left in the world.”

Chapter End Notes

sorry that I skipped a couple Sundays there, guys. and, well, considering the time I'm posting this I almost missed this Sunday too lol. I had a little personal nonsense going on but should be back on a regular posting schedule again now. hopefully.

let me know what you think.
Bran has important instructions; Daenerys speaks with her advisors; Arya receives an unwelcome request

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Harrenhal II

Jon

He knelt down to run his thumb across the blue petals of the flower that bloomed before him. The color was rare and vibrant, and the petal was soft against his skin like silk. It was a bright burst of color in an otherwise plain looking bush; the other buds had not yet chosen to burst forth. This particular flower was an early one.

Jon felt himself smile as he looked at it, thinking of the many similar roses that had graced Winterfell’s Glass Gardens; the beautiful color as striking in that place as much as it was here on this mysterious summer island. He wished he could bring the whole bush back with him, if only to see the way the color looked against a plait of silver hair.

Rhaegal called to him, a low cry that only he could hear; faint in the corners of his mind. The dragon was restless and lonely. The burden of being the very last of his kind weighing on both their minds. In the sunlight it was hard to look at him; the wounds he bore now were scarred over and healed, but it was a testament to how fiercely he had fought. It was a miracle that he had even survived, let alone had the strength to fly to this island. His wings had been ripped and torn, and it was clear that even if Rhaegal was amenable to flying, he wasn’t going anywhere anytime soon.

Nevertheless, Jon was glad to see the dragon and would be even gladder still to bring the news to Daenerys that he was alive and well.

Soft footsteps in the grass alerted him to Arya’s approach. He turned and saw she was divested of her leather armor as well, her hair braided back haphazardly and a couple of long sticks in her hand. “Has Bran come back to us?” he asked, though a glance over her shoulder at the still form of their younger brother answered his question for him.

Sam sat nearby, reading, while Edd lay asleep a short distance from him. Theon stood guard near the grand weirwood, and the Hound had set himself up against a tree on the opposite end, closer to where Jon and Arya were currently standing.

Arya shook her head. “No, he’s still in another time,” she answered. “Sam is starting to get worried.”

So was he. “I’m sure Bran knows what he’s doing,” Jon replied, standing up and straightening, hoping the assurance would work for them both. Her face showed clearly that it didn’t; Arya was too
old now to believe his words just for the sake of the fact that it was he who said them.

“I don’t think anyone really knows what they’re doing these days,” she replied. “Not really.”

He could attest to that. “Aye,” he said. “You’re probably right.”

She sighed, and looked down at the winter roses. “I haven’t ever seen any so blue,” she said after
awhile, admiring them. “Or perhaps I’ve just forgotten what they were like after all the constant
darkness.”

Jon regarded her wryly. “I think it might be a little of both,” he said.

“I wish we could bring everyone here,” she said after a bit. “To remind them that there is hope still.”

He’d already given that a great deal of thought. “You can’t tell anyone about this,” Jon cautioned.
The last thing he needed was to have people drowning in the lake in an attempt to reach the Isle and
the promise of a glimpse of sunlight.

She nodded slightly in understanding. “I won’t.” Silence settled between them then, but after a
moment, though, Arya threw one of the sticks she was carrying at him. He caught it hard against his
chest. “Come on,” she challenged, brandishing hers in front of her with the beginnings of a wicked
smile. “Fight me.”

He palmed the wood, flipping it around in his hand, testing the weight and balance. “Is that what
you’ve been holding onto these for?” he asked her, amused. The sun shimmered down through the
leaves of the trees that surrounded them.

“I don’t want to spar with real weapons,” she said. “Because that would mean I have to put my
armor back on. It’s too warm for that.”

“Sticks or swords; I won’t take it easy on you,” he warned her.

Arya grinned wider at him. “I would be insulted if you did.”

With an answering expression, he positioned himself in a defensive stance and gestured for her to
attack. A warm breeze filtered through the forest. The air was a light brush against his skin. He felt
lighter now that he was divested of furs and leather.

Arya circled him a couple times before she made her move, eyes narrowed shrewdly. He blocked it
easily, stepping out of the way with ease. She attacked again, faster, and he parried the blow with
one swing and pushed her back hard with the palm of his hand.

“Nice try,” he said.

“Shut up.”

She recovered fast and thrust at him again, landing a blow across his forearm. It struck hard; he
would have a bruise there by the end of the day.

He swung at her in answer and she blocked him just in time, the branches hitting together with a
dull thud that rang up his arm. Arya was giving it all her effort despite being considerably smaller
than him, and he found that she was giving him more push back than he expected. He reconsidered
his defense, pushed back again with a little more force, and Arya skidded backwards again, her heels
digging into the grass behind her as she attempted to stop herself with a knee to the ground. He
flashed a grin at her as he flipped the stick around in his hand again, waiting for her to regain her
“Find my weakness quickly and exploit it,” he suggested to her constructively. “Most have the advantage of both size and strength over you. What do you have?” Jon dodged a slash through the air as she attacked again, and knocked her stick out of the way almost absentmindedly. He was reminded of the many fights he’d had with Robb in the yard at Winterfell; he heard Ser Rodrick’s voice barking instructions at them as if in a distant echo. Then, it had been Robb with the size and strength, constantly overpowering him with blows that threatened to shatter his arm. Jon had spent many a time trying to build up his own strength to match, but no matter what he did Robb was always stronger.

Arya was him now, and he was Robb, except Robb never once took it easy on him. Despite being brothers, Robb had to win. He was to be Lord of Winterfell, his father’s heir, and Jon knew he could never have pushed Robb into the dirt even if the opportunity had managed to present itself. It wouldn’t have been proper, and Catelyn Stark would have found some way to punish him for it.

Jon stepped out of the way of another blow from Arya, feeling the wind on his face as her stick sword flew within a handsbreadth of him. She came at him again, fast. The strike landed on his weapon with considerable force. It knocked it hard to the side and was followed by a pointed blow to his shoulder with her fist.

They went on and on like that for some time, landing light strikes to one another in alternate sequence until Jon finally found his way past her blocks to land three consecutive blows upon her, pushing her to the ground. He thought she would yield, but she scrambled up again and snapped the stick over her knee, breaking it sharply in half. She twirled both pieces deftly in her hands so that the sharp ends pointed away from him. A downward slice was blocked by her crossed weapons and she slung him away with a grunt of effort.

Arya came at him once more with her doubled weapons, but he managed to knock one from her hands and cast it clear across the grass. Her eyes flashed in annoyance as he quickly blocked her path to retrieve it, the sharp end of his temporary weapon pointing at her.

“Do you yield?” he asked her.

“Of course not.”

She brushed the stick out of the way and was about to attack him again when Bran gasped, the sound of it echoing harshly through the quiet clearing.

Jon dropped his stick immediately as Sam jumped up to steady his brother, clearly disoriented from the experience and not sure of where he was.

“You’re fine, you’re back,” he heard Sam say, calmly and with ease. He was much practiced in assisting with Bran’s visions, and Jon was grateful for it.

“What did you see?” Jon asked, desperate for information.

Bran seemed breathless and weak as Jon approached him, his skin paler than usual and his hair sticky with sweat. “I saw the dragons born,” he said. “Over and over. I saw so many other things—but every time, I go back to that moment,” Bran said, exhaustion in his voice. “Everything pulls me back there.”

Jon felt the frown creasing his brow. “Why?”

“I don’t know,” he sighed. “I’ve seen it hundreds of times: Daenerys Targaryen walks into the
flames, and hours later emerges with three dragons. It never shows me anything different.” He seemed to be beyond exhaustion, slumping a bit against the tree, chest heaving.

Jon moved to kneel beside him, placing a hand comfortably on his shoulder. “You’ve done enough for now,” he said. “Rest awhile. We can talk later.”

His brother didn’t really acknowledge his words, but grabbed his arm tightly as he turned to look at him. His eyes were bright and insistent. “Go back,” Bran told him urgently. “Go back and ask her about it,” he said. “Every detail.”

“She’s only told me the same as you,” Jon said. “What are you looking to find?”

“I don’t know,” Bran replied. “But it’s important. Ask her. Ask Ser Jorah. I need a clue. I need to figure out what they want me to know.”

His urgent insistence was uncharacteristic and worrying. “Aye, let’s go, then,” Jon said, motioning for Bran to take his hand for help back to the chair.

Bran didn’t move. “I’m not coming with you,” his brother said. “I need this place to See.”

“I’ll bring you back,” Jon dismissed. “But I’m not leaving you here alone.”

“I can’t help you at Harrenhal,” Bran insisted. “And you can’t help Westeros stuck here with me. Go back.”

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**Daenerys**

“Sam Tarly has written to his mother and sister,” Tyrion was saying. “But we’ve not heard any word yet in return. He’s not sure if they are still at Horn Hill or not.”

Ghost nuzzled the palm of her hand, and she pet the wolf in response to his request. The fur was rough and thick behind his ears, and she liked to bury her fingers in it and let it part between them, entwining them in deep and then pulling them out slowly. It was a comforting sort of action, and the simple, repetitive motion had the dual purpose of both calming her and helping her think. They’d worked this routine out on the road, the two of them, and she had grown so used to the wolf’s constant presence at her side that, on the rare occasions he left her, she missed him terribly.

“And what of the situation in Dorne?” she asked, looking at the faded map spread along the table.

Tyrion tapped his fingers on it absentmindedly. “Dorne seems to be settling down again,” he said. “According to Varys.”

“Then they have a new leader, I take it.”

“A king, I believe. Syros of House Santagar.”

“House Santagar?” The child within her moved, clearly agitated by something, and she absentmindedly placed a hand over herself in an attempt to calm it. She was just past six turns of the moon, by her estimation, though she wasn’t entirely sure of her own accuracy.
“Spottswood is their seat,” Tyrion said, noticing her discomfort but thankfully making no mention of it. “According to Varys, Syros is relatively young; not much older than yourself. He has some female cousins and an older uncle, but otherwise his House is rather small.”

“So how did he manage to win a crown for himself?”

“It appears he’s a rather gifted swordsman as well as a cunning speaker, though it’s unclear which of the two talents was most used.”

Daenerys let out a breath. “Do you think he’ll give us any trouble?” she asked. “I’m not interested in adding another to our list of enemies.”

Tyrion took a rather large drink of his wine. “I think it’s more likely that Dorne will adopt a wait-and-see approach. Their civil war will have decimated their own forces; they can’t afford to pick fights with us or with the Golden Company. Though he may reach out to both sides in an attempt to gain protection from the other.”

“I don’t want him going to Cersei,” she said. “And I don’t want him coming after us either, regardless of whether you think we’ll win or not. How do you propose we avoid that?”

“I doubt Dorne wants anything to do with Cersei. She murdered the last leader they had and caused the war in the first place.”

With a sigh, Daenerys stood up from her chair, trying not to make it too obvious that she was using the table edge as a crutch. Tyrion noticed, however, eyes still sharp despite the inordinate amount of drinking he had been doing.

“I’m well,” she said in answer to his unspoken question. “You don’t need to treat me as if I’ll break at any moment.”

He set his glass down. “Of course, my apologies,” he said. “I just...worry for you is all.”

“Everyone here spends too much time worrying for me and not enough for themselves,” she said, a bit pointed. “After everything I have suffered through since Winterfell, the past month here has been nothing short of convalescence in comparison.” Tyrion looked at her for a long moment, about to respond when a knock on the door interrupted them. “Come in,” she said.

Sansa Stark entered the room. “Your Grace,” she acknowledged. “If I might have a word?”

Daenerys flicked her eyes to Tyrion, and he complied with the unspoken dismissal. “I will compose a response to House Santagar,” he said, pushing himself off and away from his chair. “And make sure they know of which side to support.” The door clicked shut behind him, leaving her and Sansa alone in the room.

The two of them had not had much occasion to spend time alone together, Daenerys realized. The last time they had spoken with any intimacy had been at Castle Cerwyn, fresh in the wake of Jon’s death and Winterfell’s fall. Before that, their relationship had been nothing more than a polite word or two and nothing more. It was more difficult to get on with the elder Stark sister than with Arya, though Daenerys attributed that more towards Arya’s tendency to speak her mind frequently and out of turn than her own ability to make fast friends with anyone.

“House Santagar?” Sansa inquired with a raised eyebrow. “Has Dorne worked itself out, then?”

“You know the name?”
Sansa folded her fingers together. “Only a little,” she replied. “A small family sworn to the Martells, if I remember right. I’ve not met anyone from that House personally.”

Daenerys let out a sigh. “Here’s hoping they do not become a problem.”

“I have confidence that Lord Tyrion will convince them of the correct loyalties.”

She let a wry smile turn up a corner of her mouth. “I expect so.” Silence stretched between them, though it was a comfortable one without any awkwardness or tension.

“I came to request your assistance,” Sansa continued after a moment. “If you are up for a walk to the west gate.”

A surprise request, and a much welcome distraction. “Yes, of course,” she replied. The two of them departed the room and made their way down to the stairs that cut a winding route down to the main Hall. Two Unsullied men stayed with them, close behind and silent.

The Hall was moderately crowded as they entered, the fires in the many hearths lit and crackling cheerfully, brightening up the room with an orange glow. Shadows were banished to far corners of the vaulted ceiling and the quiet depths beneath tables.

“The west gate has a broken winch that prevents it from being raised and opened,” Sansa began to explain to her as they walked through the rows of tables. “The Dothraki are camped mainly on that side, and I think it prudent they be able to quickly retreat within the walls as needed.”

“I agree.”

They made their way out of the Hall and into the cold wind of the courtyard. “Unfortunately, we have a bit of a language problem,” Sansa continued. “We need the Dothraki to help and I’m afraid I was not paying much attention when Ser Jorah was giving Jon lessons. Since my brother has decided to go sailing, I turn to you for aid.”

“And where is Ser Jorah now?”

“He is speaking with his cousin,” she replied. “I thought it best not to interrupt.”

Daenerys felt this was a kind approach. The young Lady Mormont had kept Jorah at arms length since his return to the North, and though he said he was at peace with severance from his House, she knew that it pained him. He was a changed man with many regrets, and she was glad to hear that there seemed to be a chance to mend old wounds. She would see his good deeds remembered and rewarded by his family.

They walked in silence a bit, and Daenerys let her eyes and mind wander through the groups of people as they passed. In the yard there was a small gathering that watched Brienne of Tarth giving instruction to some of the younger ones, blunted swords in hand. As they passed, Daenerys caught sight of Jaime Lannister off to the side, leaning against a low wall with ease and amusement.

“I don’t suppose you want to come in here and demonstrate constructively,” Brienne was saying to him with a hint of exasperation.

“And make a fool of myself? No, thank you,” he replied. “I’m just content to watch.” He turned to one of her pupils, and Daenerys recognized Lord Umber. “Keep your other arm up,” Jaime suggested to him, miming the action he was wanting the boy to do. “That vambrace can save your life.”
Lord Umber nodded and set his stance again. She heard the clang of swords echoing after them as she and Sansa passed out of earshot.

The West Gate and courtyard was crowded with activity, and at first it was hard for her to tell what exactly was going on.

“Hold that steady!” she heard a familiar voice shout out over the noise. Gendry was there; a large, two-handed hammer in his hand as he stood upon some stacked crates, pointing downwards towards something she couldn’t see. “There’s only one more.”

“Best step back, your Grace, my Lady,” Ser Davos said, coming up to them. “The gate’s about to come down.”

Daenerys did as she was told, and they watched as Gendry hefted the hammer into his hands and swung it round hard on the metal bracket before him.

“Should he really be doing that?” Daenerys murmured quietly to Ser Davos. Gendry’s recovery had been slow, she knew, and the effects of his injuries lingered still.

“I invite you to try and convince him otherwise, your Grace,” he replied with a hint of exasperation. “As you can see, I have clearly tried and failed.”

She watched the smith swing the hammer again, with just as much strength and force as the first blow. He seemed to be doing alright.

The third blow knocked the last of whatever impeded the gate out of the way, and the great structure of wood and metal slid downwards with a thunderous crash. Gendry sighed and relaxed, and the three of them watched as he stepped down from the stacked crates. He caught sight of them as Davos waved him over, and though he was taking care with his steps, Daenerys had spent enough time with the man in the past three months to know he was trying not to noticeably limp.

“It seems you have things well in hand,” Sansa said to him as he approached.

“Yes, milady,” Gendry replied to her. “The builders think we should have it in working order by the time the moon wanes again.”

“That’s sooner than I expected.”

He glanced at the gate. “The problem seems to be easier to mend than they thought,” he said. “Though I can’t speak to it myself. Chains and winches aren’t exactly what I’m trained for, so I try to help in other ways.” He looked down at the hammer in his hands.

“And you are well enough?” Daenerys asked, concerned for him.

“Yes, your Grace,” Gendry replied. “I am well enough for this.”

It took some effort, but they did manage to get the gate lowered to the ground and the chains detached. Daenerys found herself needing to be a bit creative in her speech when translating for the Dothraki, and not for the first time since they had parted she wished for Missandei’s patient guidance.

Her friend seemed to always know the right words for everything, and she missed her terribly.
Sansa

Jon and Arya returned on the third rise of the moon after they had left, and with noticeably fewer companions than they had started with. The most notable absence was their little brother, much to Sansa’s anger and dismay, despite Jon’s assurances that he was safe and in no danger. Sam Tarly had stayed on the island as well, and Theon had sailed back with a boat full of supplies nearly as soon as Jon had stepped off onto the wharf. He would be staying on the island with them too; tasked with sailing between the two points on regular intervals to bring news of what Bran had Seen.

She was trying not to be angry at Jon for letting Bran off on his own. In the back of her mind she knew that he wouldn’t have allowed it if he didn’t think their brother would truly be safe, but the more pressing emotion she had was less logic-based and more of a sad melancholy that once again their family was separated.

“Are you going to take your turn or not?”

Sansa looked up to see Arya across the table from her, an eyebrow raised expectantly. Their game board was spread out before them as they sat in the main Hall at a table near the edge of the room.

“Do you have somewhere else to be?” she asked her sister archly, rapping the wooden piece in her hand lightly atop the table.

“No, but we don’t have to play if you have other things to do.”

She sighed and set the piece she held down on a new square. Arya frowned at the move, trying to guess her strategy. “It’s not that,” Sansa replied. “I was just thinking about Bran.”

Arya picked up her next piece and moved it. “Bran is fine,” she said, repeating what Jon had said. “He’s probably safer than all of us right now.”

“Yes, so you both have told me.”

A good portion of the game then passed in relative silence, though the Hall was not quiet by any means. Several others were seated at tables throughout the room, taking advantage of the warmth and light. A winter storm had blown through a fortnight ago, soon after Jon and Arya had returned, burying the castle and its grounds in a layer of snow unheard of this far south. With it came cold, blustery winds that stung any instance of exposed skin with biting cruelty.

The grand doors to the Hall opened, a temporary distraction, and she glanced towards the front of the room to see Jon entering, brushing snow from his hair and shoulders.

He made his way in their direction when he caught sight of them, sitting down next to her. “Who’s winning?” Jon asked, looking at the board.

“A stalemate thus far,” Sansa replied. “Arya is better at this game than you are.”

“I don’t doubt it.”

Arya made her next move before looking up at him. “Where have you been?” she asked. “Daenerys came by asking after you.”
Jon let out a breath. “I was checking on the Dothraki,” he replied. “It took longer than I expected.”

“All is well, I trust?” Sansa asked.

“They’ve been ranging farther out than I thought. I’m hoping it doesn’t wind up causing us any problems.” He turned to Arya. “Did Daenerys say what she wanted?”

Arya shrugged. “No.”

“That’s very helpful,” Jon replied dryly.

Sansa let the ensuing bickering between them wash over her. It was a nice feeling, a familiarity that had not been present since before Jon sent her away from Winterfell. It was reminiscent of meals they would have together, just them, away from the pressure and clamor of their lords and responsibilities.

The side door nearest them opened some time later as Ser Davos appeared, clearly looking for Jon.

“This came for you, your Grace,” he said as he approached, handing her brother the bit of parchment.

Jon took the small scroll from him and broke the seal, unrolling it with a swipe of his thumb. The expression on his face darkened and his furrowed brows deepened the longer he read. Sansa noted the set of his jaw and the stiffness that crept into his posture. Whatever it was, it wasn’t good news.

He was quiet for a moment, staring at the bit of parchment with hard eyes before letting it furl back in on itself. When he looked up he focused on Arya, reaching over the table to hand the message to her to read.

Arya was confused by his reaction, and slowly took it from him.

“It is a message from Syros Santagar,” Jon said aloud. “The self-proclaimed king of Dorne.”

The sinking feeling deepened in the pit of her stomach. Sansa could hazard a guess at what a new king would write to Jon about. Arya read the message quickly and looked up sharply at Jon in response, her face a combination of confusion and shock.

“What does he want?” Sansa asked quietly.

Arya swallowed, struggling with an attempt to keep herself composed. “He wants...me,” her sister murmured in disbelief. There was a storm of emotion brewing there, and it was unclear to Sansa which one would win out. Arya handed the parchment over for her to read. “In exchange for an alliance and fealty to Jon.”

Sansa read the words with resignation. Of course; it was a logical move on Dorne’s part. Marrying a beloved sister would create a generation of support from the crown should Jon and Daenerys win the throne, making this initial offer of men and resources a small price to pay for the privilege of lasting family loyalty.

In his letter, Syros Santagar promised enough resources to stave off the impending doom of starvation that they would soon be facing. It was generous and fortuitous, and were it not Jon he was asking, but a different king, the price he wanted would be next to nothing. The choice would be simple. What was one sister compared to saving thousands of lives?

But Arya was not just some girl. Arya was their sister, and a part of her was angry that once again
House Stark would pay the price for everyone else.

“Tyrion and I rarely see eye to eye on what’s important,” Jon growled, correctly guessing to whom Davos was referring. “And that narrows even more as time goes on.”

Sansa looked across the table at Arya. She was clearly overwhelmed by the news, and trying not to appear angry and distraught as the weight of the offer began to settle in. Sansa did not envy her this burden.

“Can I...think about this before you reply?” Arya asked quietly.

Jon looked at her in surprise. “What?” He’d not been expecting a reaction other than a furious, resounding no, and was clearly taken aback by her muted and conflicted response.

Arya stood up from the table. “I just want to think about it, alright?” she said, her voice hard like steel. “Please.”

“Wait, Arya, listen,” Jon started to say, reaching out for her. “We don’t-“

“Just let me think about it,” Arya interrupted, cutting him off a bit sharply. “I’m not a child. You don’t need to decide things for me.”

There was a moment of silence, but then Jon nodded his head in assent and understanding. “Of course,” he murmured.

There was a hesitating pause, but then their sister turned swiftly to leave out the door in the far corner; the one that led to the lesser courtyard and the path to the dilapidated Godswood. Sansa knew she wasn’t going there to pray, but to be left alone.

“Ser Davos, will you find out where my wife is?” Jon asked. He held out a hand for the scroll Sansa held, and she gave it back to him without a word. “I would speak with her.”

“Aye, your Grace,” the older man responded with a nod, and soon she and Jon were alone at the end of the table, the half-finished game board out in front of her, forgotten. Sansa began to collect the pieces and put them away. Jon sat next to her in silence and she waited for him to speak. She could tell that the matter weighed heavily on his mind.

“What would you do?” he asked her finally, after several quiet moments had passed. He began helping her put the game away; handing her the wooden tokens one at a time.

“What would I do about which part?” she asked. “Are you asking what I would I do if I were you? Or if I were Arya?”

Jon debated his answer. “Both, perhaps,” he murmured quietly. “I know what I want to do. I want to reply to this offer telling him to fuck off.”

“I would hope your reply would be more diplomatic than that,” she replied. “You are a king, you know.”

He let out a breath of frustration. “And I hate it.”
She raised an eyebrow at him. “No, you don’t.”

“I don’t like the idea of sending you or Arya away to anyone. I don’t care what it would get me in return.”

Sansa placed her hand on his as it rested atop the table. “I know, but you have more to think of than just me and Arya,” she reminded him. “In the scheme of everything else, what is one person over the needs of thousands?” She sighed. “And yet, the reality of it all is that the situations between Arya and I are very different. If it had been me he’d asked for, this conversation would not be happening.”

“My reaction would have been the same,” Jon insisted.

She was getting annoyed by his stubbornness. “It’s not about you,” she said, annoyed. “Arya has value to you as a fighter, and that is not something I can provide. I’m also not in love with someone else.”

It was clear by his reaction that he hadn’t considered the seriousness of their sister’s affections for Gendry. “She told you this?” he asked quietly. His eyes held a deep sympathy and sadness.

“But in so many words,” Sansa replied as she pulled her hand away from his. “In fact, she hasn’t said anything to me about it at all. But it’s easy enough to see if you’re paying attention.”

She had specifically made time and excuses for Gendry to help her and Ser Davos with their attempts to repair the castle. It was her way of judging his character for herself, and so far she found him to be decent, kind-hearted, and staunchly loyal. Rarely did she see him interact with Arya, but she couldn't imagine he would treat her any different than he treated others, and if that was the case, her sister was lucky to know a man that cared for her mind and her spirit, and not the position and title that marrying her could gain him. It made her almost jealous, in a way.

Jon sighed. “I can’t allow her to accept this,” he said, tapping the scroll sharply on the table. “Not knowing that.”

“You can allow her the freedom to choose for herself, as she asked,” Sansa advised. “And then find a way to make your peace with whatever that is.”

Chapter End Notes

list of things I did last weekend instead of updating:
1. read the entirety of A Princess of Mars for the eight thousandth time (one of my favorite books, diss it and I will fight you)
2. learned Rains of Castamere on the piano and promptly annoyed my husband with it for days
3. edited some autocorrect typos and sentence structure in some earlier chapters (sorry, this is all unbetaed since like, ch. 10. I try my best)
4. FLEW TO CHICAGO AND BACK because apparently I have to move there in the fall and my gulf coast Texas ass is not prepared. winter is coming to my life for real guys, send help

There was originally going to be an Arya POV attached to the end of this, but the chapter was getting so unwieldy that I had to break it up and move it to the next one.

Syros Santagar is just some dude I made up, by the way.

Next chapter begins laying out the endgame. This is definitely not going to get finished by the start of the show, but hopefully I've diverged enough from it that it's not weird to watch that and read this at the same time.

Let me know what you think.
Chapter Summary

Arya makes some difficult choices.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Arya V

...in exchange for Arya Stark’s hand in marriage, House Santagar is prepared to offer Dorne’s allegiance and fealty to Daenerys Targaryen, the rightful Queen of the Seven Kingdoms, and to you, her husband and King. Upon agreement of this condition, Dorne will supply food for the winter and men to fight the Golden Company in the Reach...

She was tense and stressed as she paced through the castle, her chest tight and her mind a whirlwind of many different thoughts and feelings. She was torn between wanting to cry in frustration and punch something with her bare hands until her knuckles bled.

Perhaps she could do both.

No one had asked to marry her before, and as far as she knew, her parents had not gotten around to promising her to anyone before they were both killed. It was a strange sort of feeling that she wasn’t prepared for and she was certainly not handling it well. She thought of Gendry, painful as that was, and wondered how in any hell she could even begin to explain this to him.

Maybe it would have been better to stay in the hall and talk it out with Sansa and Jon, but the desire to be alone was too strong. She didn’t want them to see her struggle with this. She didn’t want to look at Jon’s distraught, pitying expression any longer.

She had intended to go to the Godswood, for the silence and for the solitude, but at the last moment decided against it. Jon would know to look for her there, and at this moment she had no intention of being found.

Up ahead, she could see the familiar form of the Hound sitting on a stone bench a short ways in front of her, sharpening his knife. As if possessed by some strange spell, Arya strode over to him and sat herself down without a word.

He continued with his task, not even pausing to acknowledge she was there.

Several long moments passed with nothing between them but the slow scraping of the whetstone along the blade. Her memories of their travel together contained many such moments as this, and the
familiarity was a comfort.

“And that’s what you’re doing? Watching over her?”

“Aye, that’s what I’m doing.”

“I don’t know if I ever told you,” Arya said finally, letting out a breath and staring ahead at the torch that flickered opposite them. “But I’m glad you’re not dead.”

The sound of stone on steel paused, briefly. “I’m glad you’re not dead either,” the Hound said before resuming.

She leaned against the wall behind them, hoping the cold stone would ground her thoughts somehow. She focused on rhythmic sound of the blade sharpening, the cold touch of the wind that twisted through the towers, and the hard beating of her own heart. The Hound said nothing to her; their relationship familiar enough that he was wise on when to wait and when to speak.

“I’m sorry I left you there, to die,” she murmured.

“No you aren’t,” he countered. “And don’t be a whining bitch about it now.”

Arya sighed. “Fine, I take it back,” she said dryly. “I wish you had died a horrible, lingering death on that hill and I’m disappointed that you lived. Is that better?”

He let out a disbelieving snort. “Isn’t there a blacksmith somewhere you can annoy instead of me?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“You’re as bad at lying as your brother.”

“Can you go back to being silent?” she snapped. She didn’t want to talk about Gendry, she didn’t want to talk about Jon, and she definitely didn’t want to talk to the Hound about the problem she’d found herself in. And yet...she couldn’t help the words that tumbled out of her mouth. “I don’t know what to do,” she said, frustrated, launching right into it. There was a sort of pleading note to her voice that she had not intended.

“Don’t know what to do about what?” the Hound asked. If he had noticed her tone he made no mention of it, nor did he stop what he was doing.

She still didn’t really want to talk about it, but he was here, there was no one around, and she had to find some way to get her thoughts in order. “The new king of Dorne has written to Jon about an alliance,” she said, hard and bitter. “And he requests my hand in marriage in exchange for his support.”

To his credit, the Hound showed no reaction to the information outside a general tightening of the hand that held the knife. “Seven blessings to you and your betrothed,” he replied, a bit sarcastically.

“You’re not surprised by this?” she asked.

“Why are you? You’re still a hightborn girl, despite your efforts.” He continued on with his sharpening, slightly more aggressive now in his approach. “And now your brother is a king.”

“Jon doesn’t want to accept,” Arya said. “And was very adamant in his objection.”

“Well, then, why are you whining to me about it?”
She stared hard at the torch in front of her. “I don’t know if I agree,” she whispered, and wondered what the Arya of one and ten would think of her now. She had spent her entire life trying to make her own way, to live her own life outside of the walls of a highborn lady, and here she was, considering to bear such confinement for the rest of her life.

Her admission was what made the Hound fully stop what he was doing and turn to look at her. “Why?”

Arya continued looking ahead, not interested in meeting his eyes. She wondered if there would be disappointment there. “If it saved thousands of lives? What right do I have to live how I want if it meant that others would not live at all?”

“You’ve spent too much time with the queen,” the Hound said finally. “Starting to fucking sound like her.”

She turned to look at him, the ruined side of his face making his scrutinizing expression more severe. “That’s not such a bad thing,” she murmured. “Is it?”

“Listen,” he said, a bit annoyed. “You can be a self-sacrificing cunt all you want, but don’t be so eager to fall on your sword. You can only do it once.”

She needed to find Gendry.

He wasn’t at his usual spot in the forges. One of the other smiths said he was called to help the Wildlings with some project; based on what little information he was able to give her, she figured he was probably off gods-knew-where with Tormund. She would waste more time trying to track them down than she really cared to, and was thus secretly glad Gendry was not there. She could spend the extra time trying to figure out a solution to her problem that didn’t make her feel either heartbroken or guilty.

It was a short walk back to the castle, doing her best to avoid anyone that would report her whereabouts back to Jon, and after that it was easy to slip her way into the dark corridor that led the way to Gendry’s room. The door was unlocked, and she let herself in quietly to wait.

Arya had only come in here once before, and nothing about it had changed. He had wanted to give the room up once he was well enough to walk without aid, wanting to stay out with the Wildlings and give the place to someone else instead. She had convinced him to stay in it, mostly out of a selfish wish for him to remain close by. She liked not having to trek all the way out to the Wildlings to see him. The forges were already far enough.

She urged the low fire back to life and pulled her cloak off from about her shoulders, throwing the garment across the top of the single chair without much thought. With a sigh, she sat herself down on the edge of the bed. After a brief moment she pulled off her gloves too, and her boots, and lay down atop the furs with a heavy, sagging, crumple.

It smelt like him, faintly. A hint of fire and steel and something else that was wonderfully pleasant.

Her heart lurched and she blinked fast. Maybe it was a mistake to come here. Maybe she should speak to him somewhere else, somewhere there would be people to see them and thus prevent her from collapsing entirely into a complete mess of emotion. Everything reminded her too much of what
she would leave behind if she agreed to Dorne’s offer.

The stone ceiling was plain and dark above her, and she blinked hard to keep the tears at bay.

She loved him.

If anything, that was the knife in her heart that hurt the most. She had come to this realization the moment she read the message; each word twisting the blade deeper and harder into her chest. How could she agree to a life without him in it? How could they ever be parted from each other again?

It was some time before she heard his boots in the hall and the sound of the door pushing open. She’d not realized she’d fallen asleep, and her eyes snapped open to see him sitting on the bed at her side. Gendry regarded her with some amount of mild concern.

“Is everything alright?” he asked. “I just passed your sister out in the courtyard. She asked if I’d seen you.”

Arya pushed herself up slowly, trying to keep her expression neutral and sure she was failing at it. She used to be better at this. She was better at this. Yet somehow, that control disappeared when he looked at her. “Did she say anything else?”

“No,” he replied. “Should she have?”

She moved closer and pulled herself onto his lap, settling her knees on either side of him. His hands moved to her waist to steady her as she took his face in her own and kissed him without a word; slowly and with a deliberate, lingering intensity. She liked the way his hands felt on her. She liked the way she burned inside.

Slowly, tortuously, she pulled back just enough to look down at him, her fingers still splayed down the sides of his face and neck, her fingers feeling the heat of his skin and the hard pounding of his pulse beneath it. The beat of it echoed her own, and for a moment everything was still.

There was a clear question in his eyes, but instead of letting him ask it she kissed him again; teeth grazing along the edge of his lower lip. A low sound growled quietly from his throat as he kissed her in return, holding her close, his embrace strong and unyielding. His mouth left hers to blaze a trail of fire down her neck. The light scratch of his beard was a pleasant sensation. She weaved her fingers in his hair, grabbing onto it like it was the only thing that kept her from floating away. His mouth found its way back to hers and she gently, but insistently, guided him down upon the bed.

He was on top of her and she liked the way it felt. The weight of him was a comforting pressure. It was hard to breathe and yet she felt as if she didn’t really need to. She decided to follow this feeling to see where it lead, and leaving the talking for later. It could wait.

Gendry, however, was not convinced. “Not that I’m complaining or anything,” he said, breaking the kiss finally and looking down at her. “But will you tell me what’s going on with you?”

“Isn’t it obvious?” she deflected, her eyes on his mouth. She was making a bit of a show of it, but it wasn’t an act. She wanted his hands on her. She wanted something more. She concentrated on kissing him instead of the real reason that she had come.

It almost worked, but after another moment he pulled away again. “I think I know you better than that,” he said. “Will you just tell me what’s on your mind already?”

She could see that there would be no stopping him until he got an answer. He was stubborn that way.
Arya took a deep breath and steeled herself against the pain of what she had to say. “Jon received a raven from Dorne,” she whispered, the weight of the responsibility seeming to crush her from within. Her hands gripped him tighter. “An offer of alliance. They will provide food and bannermen and swear fealty to him and Daenerys…” She took a breath and found it difficult to continue. How was he going to react?

Gendry frowned down slightly at her. “And? I assume he wants something in return.”

Arya looked up at him, staring at his face, memorizing the color of his eyes, the line of his beard, the way his hair flipped down over his forehead just so. “Me,” she whispered. “He wants...me.”

She watched with aggrieved, painful sadness as realization of what this meant dawned on Gendry’s face. He pushed himself up slowly into a sitting position, causing her hands to fall away from him. She braced for his reaction. Tears threatened to escape but she bit her own lip hard in an effort to keep them from falling.

“So that’s it then,” he said quietly. “Some arsehole in Dorne wants to marry you.” He sounded defeated and sad; not angry like she was expecting. She sat up on the bed as well, staring at his face. He didn’t look at her. Instead, he focused hard on some part of the stone floor before him. His breaths were carefully measured, and she could feel that he was tense and on guard. The easy intimacy they had enjoyed just moments ago was gone.

“Jon does not want to accept.”

Gendry sighed. “Shouldn't he, though?” he asked.

Her throat was tight and she couldn’t decide which emotion she was feeling. On one hand, it wasn’t anything she hadn’t already considered. Yet, on the other, she felt the sting of disappointment and sadness that Gendry had agreed. Some small part of her had hoped, whether futile or not, that he would have some strong objection, and his voice would be enough to convince her that Dorne could fuck off and leave her alone.

“You would have me sent off to some stranger then?” she asked.

“Obviously I wouldn’t,” he replied, turning to her and clearly pained. “But if it saved lives and helped end the war…” He let out a shuddering breath. “Even if it rips my heart out, how could I do anything but support it? I can’t give you a kingdom.”

“I don’t want a kingdom,” she whispered. She leaned forward to kiss him but he didn’t move to meet her.

“Don’t,” he whispered. “Please don’t.”

Her hand was resting on the clasps of his coat, and she fisted it tightly as she closed her eyes. She couldn’t keep the tears away now, and a single, warm drop slid down her face to darken her sleeve. “Jon or Daenerys could legitimize you, give you a name,” she said, looking down at where their arms entwined. “You’re a good man from a noble House. Your father was a-”

“It doesn’t matter who my father was,” Gendry said, shaking his head. “It only matters who I am, and I am neither a prince or a lord.” He sighed. “Nor do I have a desire to be one.”

There was a long silence between them, broken only by the crackling of the fire in the small hearth. She slid her hand down the length of his arm to lace their fingers together, and he let her.

“What would I do with a name anyway?” he asked with a whisper.
“You could give it to a wife,” she murmured in response. *To children.*

Gendry let out a breath. “You say that like it could be someone other than you.”

Her heart felt like it was beating furiously in her throat. It was a pounding, nauseous feeling as she tried to grasp for words. He was so close to her. She met his eyes, dark and intense as he waited for her to say something.

*You will marry a high Lord and rule his castle,* her father had said. *Your sons will be knights and princes and lords.*

*No,* she had insisted, so sure of herself. *That’s not me.*

She’d never, before some hours ago, considered marriage and all the things that came with it. Sansa had always gone on about it when they were younger, as if it were something to aspire to, but to Arya it had just sounded awful, like chains you couldn’t see and couldn’t break. She felt like she would be all but a prisoner to a man and his title and his keep, her true self locked away forever to wither and die. *What lord would want a wife that wished to fight and ride like a man?* she had asked herself. None such existed in her mind.

That fact in itself had soured her on the whole idea to the point where she was determined never to give any of it a second thought.

But what if the man had neither titles nor a keep?

Did that change anything?

She didn’t want to marry the man from Dorne, and selfishly she didn’t want Gendry to marry anyone else either. The pain in his voice echoed in her own heart. She couldn’t bear to imagine any life in which they were not together; yet she couldn’t bring herself to suggest the alternative: that Gendry marry her now and solve the issue irretrievably. Her voice was shaking and quiet as she tried to speak. She had to say it.

“You must know…” she started. The words were the precipice of a cliff and she prepared to fling herself willingly over the edge. “You must know that I lo-“

“Don’t,” he cut her off sharply, the tone of his voice practically begging her not to continue. “Please don’t say it. I can’t hear that now.”

They were still touching, but there was a distance like a chasm between them. “You can’t bear to hear the truth?” she whispered.

“It would have been better to leave this alone,” he murmured, a hand going through his hair in frustration. He didn’t seem to hear her. “I tried to leave it alone. This would have been much easier. But now-“ There was a growl in his throat. “But now I know what I will lose.”

Her heart was shattering. “You haven’t lost me,” she whispered, taking his face in her hands again. “No one has agreed to anything.” She kissed him. “There’s no reason for anything to change. I just-“

When he kissed her back, it burned. His hands were rough on her, holding her tight. She felt his teeth grazing her lip and she curled her fingers in his hair, gasping. There was heat from the fire in the hearth, and a different sort of heat that boiled up from deep within and seared her soul. The kisses between them were hard and bruising, and instead of them satiating the blaze inside of her it only stoked it hotter, making her heart pound and her limbs weak.
Her fingers grazed over the laces of his leather jerkin, and without breaking their kiss she began to loosen them and push it off his shoulders. He didn’t stop her, like she expected, but helped her by shrugging it and his coat off all at once and tossing them to the floor with a heavy sounding thud.

He still didn’t tell her to stop even as her shaking fingers fumbled with the next layer of clothing. He didn’t offer up any excuses why they shouldn’t. Instead he followed her lead, working to remove her own clothes in return.

It wasn’t at all like she expected. Not that she’d really had any expectations to begin with, if she was honest, but still - the whole experience was at all times evoking a slew of different emotions. Love and lust. Grief and heartbreak. She felt the strengthening of their bond as well as the shattering of her heart. She was overwhelmed by it all.

Afterwards, they lay entangled together, out of breath, hearts pounding, kisses changing from hard, urgent, desperate ones to soft, tender, almost lazy brushes of their lips. She dozed in and out of a half sleep with her head upon his shoulder and an arm across his chest, the length of her body touching his wherever it could, skin to skin. She felt both intensely vulnerable and yet safer than she’d ever been.

It was some hours later when she realized that she had fallen asleep completely, stirred from a dreamless rest by a knock on the door.

“I’m going to murder whoever that is,” Gendry muttered under his breath, low and rough from sleep.

“I’ll help you,” she replied, placing a kiss to the skin of his shoulder. A red, angry scar shone there, recently healed. She kissed that too.

Much to her dismay, Gendry moved to leave the bed as the knock sounded through the room again, insistent but quiet. He fumbled briefly with the ties of his breeches and called out a half acknowledgement as the person knocked again. She watched him pull his wool shirt over himself before opening the door just a crack.

The way the room was arranged meant that whoever it was could only see the hearth and the wall it was in, and therefore she was not inclined to dress or even to move. She was pleasantly warm and relaxed, and was already falling back into a half sleep.

“What is it?” she heard Gendry ask.

“There’s some help needed in the south tower.” Arya recognized Edd’s voice.

“Alright.”

There was a pause. “That’s not why I’m here,” Edd continued, his voice a low murmur and now inaudible to her. She didn’t pay much attention to their conversation. It was short, and soon the door was closing again.

She opened her eyes when Gendry didn’t immediately return to bed, noting his stiff posture as he remained by the door. Arya reached for him as he looked over at her, his expression pained. He didn’t move to join her.

“Edd told me that your family is looking for you,” Gendry murmured. “And I think he knew you were in here.”
Arya day up slowly in the bed, clutching the furs to her chest to ward off the chill of his absence. “Edd isn’t going to say anything,” she said. “And it doesn’t matter anyway if he does.”

He sighed, then, and pushed his hair back away from his face. “It does matter, though,” he insisted, walking back over to her. “You realize I could be executed for what we’ve just done?”

She frowned. “Jon’s not like that.”

“I’m not talking about your brother defending your honor,” Gendry said, sitting down on the bed beside her. “I’m talking about me being a smith and you being a highborn lady. I’m sure there are a few lords that would like to remind me of my place for even speaking to you.” He let out a breath. “Especially with you being promised to someone else—“

“I am not promised to anyone,” she said vehemently, shifting herself to look at him full on, the furs falling away from her.

“You’re as good as,” he insisted, clearly making a conscious effort to keep his voice even. She could feel that he was tense and on edge, though his hands did start to wander across her skin. First her arms, then her waist, and then beneath the furs that covered her legs. “I know you made your decision before you even came to my room. I know you hoped I would change your mind, that somehow I would be able to give you the answer that you wanted. But things don’t always turn out the way we’d like.”

She felt the fabric of his shirt brushing against the skin of her breasts as she pulled him into an embrace.

“I don’t want to leave this room,” she whispered, kissing him softly. “I just want to stay in here with you.”

His hands were warm as they moved up her back, and he began to trail kisses down her neck, to her collar, to the valley between her breasts; the scratch of his beard sending shivers down her body. “Don’t tempt me,” he whispered.

The moon had been rising when she had left Jon and Sansa in the Hall, and as she and Gendry walked out into the courtyard now, she saw that it was rising again. She sighed aloud; more time had passed than she’d intended.

“What is it?” Gendry asked her.

There was barely a handspan of distance between the two of them, and yet it was still too much. She wanted his arms around her.

She wanted to be back in his bed.

A bit of a flush crept up her neck as she thought about what they had, up until very recently, been doing. She glanced at him out of her periphery, appreciating the way he looked. He still preferred the dark clothes of the Night’s Watch, though with his coat of dark leather and fur, patched and frayed as it was, he could pass for one of Tormund’s Wildlings as well. The Southron way he spoke was the only hint left of the King’s Landing boy she had known.
“Nothing,” she deflected, addressing her earlier sigh of resignation and not the memory of his fingertips pressing into her skin, or how warm his hands had been when they had explored her body.

“Undressing me with your eyes is nothing now, is it?” he asked. There was only the barest hint of teasing there. It was muted, certainly, but still there.

“I’d like to go back to bed,” she replied quietly.

Gendry stopped and turned to her. “So would I,” he said. He let out a slow breath that fogged in the air. They should be embracing instead of standing stiffly in the darkness, at arm’s length. Snow began to fall, light, airy flakes swirling between them.

“Arya.”

Her sister’s call of her name cut sharply across the yard, and they both turned to see Sansa standing in the doors to the main hall, elevated slightly atop the short flight of stairs that lead to it. Brienne stood next to her, a silent sentry.

She looked back to Gendry, and he jerked his head slightly to where her sister waited. “Go on, then,” he murmured. “Come and find me later if you like.”

The idea of that lightened her heart. “You don’t want me to stay away?”

His gaze felt like it could burn right through her. She was flushed and warm despite the chill of winter. “I don’t have strength enough for that,” he murmured.

Neither did she. It was hard enough to walk away now, and she almost couldn’t bring herself to do it. Each step on the stairs felt heavy. She avoided looking at Sansa as she approached.

“Where have you been?” her sister asked, her tone more worried than accusatory. Arya felt her eyes on her shrewdly, looking over her appearance, and then over her shoulder to where Gendry was undoubtedly walking off. Arya didn’t look behind her and confirm if he was or not.

“I was trying to make a decision, as I said,” Arya replied, unable to keep the pain from her voice. It wasn’t a lot, just a hint in her tone, but it was enough for Sansa to furrow her brows in deeper worry.

The three of them proceeded into the castle and towards the back stairs that led up to Jon’s main council room, a smaller hall with a balcony that overlooked the lake. Footsteps on stone echoed in the silence. She wondered if her sister could guess what had transpired, and shifted uncomfortably under her scrutinizing gaze.

The answer to that, apparently, was yes. “Arya, what have you done?” Sansa asked her as they turned into the empty hallway.

Arya immediately took offense to the accusatory tone. “What’s it to you?” she snapped, walking faster. “I can make my own choices.” Sansa grabbed her arm to stop her, and Arya whirled around angrily. “Let me go,” she said, ripping her arm away.

“I don’t think you understand the magnitude of what you’re doing,” Sansa replied. “Rejecting Dorne right now is not-“

“I didn’t say I was,” she shot back. “I know what’s at stake. Thousands of lives, in exchange for mine.”

Sansa let out a breath. “Laying with Gendry helped you come to that conclusion, did it?” she asked
The accusation burned. Brienne shifted uncomfortably behind them. “I don’t want to talk about it,” Arya said.

“You’re going to have to. Or would you prefer that Jon be present for this conversation?” Sansa hissed. “I’m trying to help you, you stubborn idiot!”

“How in the Seven Hells is this helping me?” Arya asked. “All you’re going to do is scold me like I’m a child. You’re not the one being sold off to some stranger—”

“No, but I know what it’s like to be sold off,” Sansa snapped. “Twice in fact, or have you forgotten? Perhaps you could learn something instead of dismissing me out of hand.”

Arya immediately felt guilty and tried to apologize, but Sansa waved it away.

Her sister sighed and continued again with a calmer tone. “I may not carry a sword,” she said quietly. “But I’m not helpless. There are different kinds of fighting. Different kinds of strength.”

The silence was weighted and horrible. “I’m sorry,” Arya said finally. “I didn’t mean it like that.”

*I could never have survived what you survived.*

Sansa didn’t look judgemental or cross with her at all; merely sympathetic. The rest of the way down the hall passed quietly between them, and Arya concentrated on the sound of her own boots and the soft metallic sounds of Brienne’s armor. The tall woman had not had a thing to say regarding the conversation, and for all appearances seemed inclined to let it pass without acknowledgement.

Jon looked up as they entered the council room, relief on his face as he saw her. “Where have you been?” he asked, echoing Sansa’s earlier sentiment. Daenerys was in the room as well, sitting down at the end of the table, Tyrion at her side and Ser Jorah behind them. Ser Davos was at the other end, as were a handful of Northern lords, and Edd. The Lord Commander glanced at her just once, his face giving away nothing of what he thought. She wondered if he had said anything to anyone about what he knew.

“She’s been in the Godswood,” Sansa lied for her smoothly. “That’s where I found her.”

“Because I let you,” Arya murmured, feeling strange about the lie but also not wanting to get into it in front of all these people about where she *really* had been, and with whom.

Jon believed them, though, letting out a sigh. “I’ve had people looking for you,” he said, walking around the table to her.

“Well, here I am,” she said, a bit monotone. Jon was already reacting to the answer he saw in her face, a combination of frustrated powerlessness and pity written there in his eyes plain as anything. “Don’t look at me like that,” she said to him, annoyed.

“You don’t have to do this,” he said. “You don’t have to make a decision right now.”

“All due respect, your Grace, but the matter *is* urgent,” Tyrion interjected. “If he offers aid then we cannot wait.”

“You’ll forgive me if I’m not inclined to so easily sell my sisters to the first man who asks for them,” Jon replied icily. “And considering she is well trained how to fight and *fight well*, Arya is worth more to me here than you are.”
Tyrion glanced at Daenerys for support. Arya wasn’t sure if the queen gave it or not; her face was expressionless and her voice was neutral as she answered his unspoken plea. “You already know my feelings on this, my Lord,” she responded.

The Hand of the Queen sighed, and Arya could see his posture was frustrated and angry. He did not like Jon and was clear about it for the first time that Arya had ever seen. She glanced at Sansa, who did not seem surprised, and made a note to ask her about it later.

“We need allies,” Tyrion pressed, trying to keep his voice level. “Westeros is fractured and broken. This is the best and easiest way to heal it.”

“If winter grips any harder, we may starve to death before the dead come to us,” Lady Mormont interjected. “I’d offer up my own hand if it kept us alive.”

She couldn’t let it go on any longer. “Would anyone like to know what I think?” Arya asked into the tense, angry silence.

Jon looked at her, a bit cowed. “Go on,” he murmured.

Arya steeled herself and tried to sound as calm and unaffected as possible. “I imagined helping you win the war by fighting at your side,” she said to him, and to everyone in the room, hoping she came across like Sansa always did: confident and in control. “But—” She looked at her sister briefly, and then back to Jon. There are different kinds of strength. “I suppose this way works just as well. Everyone here is right; you should accept Dorne’s offer. I agree to their terms.”

Chapter End Notes

so yeah, we haven’t had a single character chapter in a while. this was supposed to be the first half of a multi POV, but it just kept getting so long and all of it was important. so thus it became Arya V instead of Harrenhal III.

some action comes back next chapter.

let me know what you think.
Chapter Summary

Gendry looks death in the face and tells it to fuck off.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Gendry II

Snow crunched beneath his feet.

The forest was silent, completely devoid of all sounds of life that would normally be here, even in winter. No birds, no deer, no tracks of any kind except the ones that he and the others made. Thick clouds covered the half-moon most of the time, making the constant darkness deeper and his range of visibility smaller.

Tormund was a little ways ahead of him. “We should stop here,” the Wildling said, snow and trees muffling his voice.

Gendry sighed and slung the pack from his shoulders. “How much farther do you intend to go?” he asked, dropping it to the ground and rifling through it. Two others behind him walked past, beginning the routine of gathering whatever dry wood they could find for a fire.

“Miss your she-wolf already?” Tormund teased.

He resisted the temptation to get defensive; he’d been putting up with it for near on a fortnight. Though Edd had told him he wasn’t going to say anything to Jon, apparently that same discretion did not extend to Tormund.

“I’ve just had enough trudging through snow and wilderness with you to last me a lifetime and a half,” Gendry replied. “At least in the forge I can pretend this shit winter isn’t so bad.”

“Sometimes I forget you’re not actually a Wildling,” Beric replied, dropping his pack beside him.

“That’s because he looks like one of us now,” Tormund said, and seemed almost prideful. “We’ll make a man out of him some day.”

“How much snow-trudging makes a man, do you think?” Gendry asked, the question sarcastic and rhetorical. He pulled out a small hand-axe from his pack, intending to help with wood gathering just to escape the conversation.

Tormund let out a bark of a laugh. “Answer his question,” he told Beric. “How much more into these woods?”

The one-eyed man looked contemplative. “We’re not far from High Heart, I think,” he mused. “It’s about time we circle back round to Harrenhal. Don’t want to get too close to the Westerlands and run into the Golden Company again.”
“Fair plan,” Gendry replied darkly, remembering his last encounter with Cersei’s mercenaries. There was a patch in the shoulder of his coat, front and back, mirroring the holes the arrow had left in his body. Another had torn through his left flank, and yet another had buried itself into his right leg, just above the knee.

He didn’t remember getting the last two; just that first strike and then falling into the snow, coming back to himself enough to register Hot Pie dragging him behind a wall.

The rest was a blur. He remembered Hot Pie’s blood spraying across his face. He remembered Arya fighting the soldier that had come for them, and the terror he had felt cutting through the pain. He remembered the Golden Company pulling Daenerys from his grasp and leaving him in the snow to die.

Then Jon was there, and he remembered nothing else until he woke again in a bed at Harrenhal with Ser Davos sitting by his side.

That had been almost three months ago, and only recently had he been able to walk without a limp or breathe without pain.

Tormund seemed well inclined to test his limits now, in any case.

Jon had asked the Wildling to scout across the western area, wanting to know if there were any signs of either the gold mercenaries or the dead. Tormund, in turn, had come into his forge and practically dragged him out of it. I didn’t spend that time since Eastwatch showing you how to read the land just to leave you behind, he’d said in explanation, barely giving Gendry any time to tell Arya that he was even leaving.

It wasn’t even a proper goodbye. He’d managed to catch her just inside the main Hall.

“Watch yourself,” she had murmured to him, her posture stiff and her words formal in the presence of others, but he could see the unspoken plea behind her eyes.

“As you say, milady,” he’d replied to her with only a nod, and not the kiss and embrace they both desperately wanted.

She didn’t scoff at the title. She knew what it meant, what it had become: a placeholder for the truth they both knew but couldn’t say.

I love you.

His chest ached as he scoured the immediate area for useable firewood. The chore wasn’t giving him the distraction he wanted. All he could think about was her.

Tormund was right; he did miss her. He had just started to get used to the feel of her in bed beside him, and he longed for it again.

They were torturing themselves by continuing to lay together, he knew, and yet he couldn’t bring himself to put an end to it. She was a match to him in every way, and the thought of her with someone else was like a knife in his heart. A knife that twisted sharply each time he was forced to be reminded that she would not be his forever.

He shouldn’t have let himself fall this far. He should have put her from his mind the moment he noticed there was something more between them. Now it was too late. He was in too deep, too wrapped up in her to save himself.
Put your hands on me, she would murmur against the skin of his neck, lips and teeth brushing gently across his pulse there and taking his breath away. Her eyes, dark and lidded through her lashes as she looked up from beneath him, her hair spread out across the pillows like dark rivers on the white linen.

He hacked at a branch a little too hard, breaking it a bit violently in his tormented, silent frustration. No, this was definitely not helping.

Gendry walked a bit farther into the trees, trying to find a path that one of the others had not walked. Footsteps trampled the snow all around and it looked like a group of a hundred had passed through.

He frowned.

As he pressed forward, he quickly began to realize that the footprints did not belong to their party at all. Judging by the way the snow lay, it had been only a handful of hours since whatever made them had been here.

They weren’t alone.

The tracks were muddled and indistinct, like each one of them shuffled or were uncaring in their steps. He followed them carefully, intending only to get a general sense of their direction before turning back and alerting Tormund.

A short while later he came to a small clearing just to the west. The wind stopped and it seemed to get colder as he stood there, transfixed and horrified at what lay before him.

A massacre; severed parts of at least a dozen people laid out in deliberate arrangement, some clearly torn apart at the scene judging by the amount of blood that darkened the snow. His mouth was dry and he was frozen in place as he stared at it, the smell of blood and dead flesh now beginning to hit him in full force.

He’d heard about things like this, the macabre designs made by the dead. His heart pounded loud in his ears as he looked at the seven-pointed spiral.

He had to get back. He had to tell Tormund. They had to go back to Harrenhal right away.

They couldn’t stay here.

He turned to run, but blue eyes stared back at him in the darkness.

Fuck.

Despite everything he’d been through, despite the mounting losses of the war, Gendry had only actually seen the dead up close the one time, in that skirmish beyond the Wall with Jon. When the Night King had come to Eastwatch, and then to Castle Black, all he’d focused on was the dragon.

The eyes made his skin crawl. Four more pairs of them glowed in the darkness behind the first.

He’d only made it five or six steps before they swarmed him, knocking him down to the ground hard. The impact sent jarring pain through his arms and knees. He scrambled for his axe, just out of reach, as skeletal fingers grabbed at his legs and his coat, torn throats screeching. His heart beat hard against his chest and it was hard to breathe. His hands scraped desperately in the snow. He kicked hard against the pressure on his legs, hoping it would free him.

Broken teeth ripped at his clothes. The hands of the wights, unnaturally strong, pulled at his limbs.
With an cry of desperation, he dragged himself forward on the ground and finally grasped the axe handle, swinging it round with all the force he could muster.

Still, it was not enough. His dragonglass was lost to the snows, and the axe only seemed to anger them.

A hand swiped at his neck. He felt the sting of it and the warmth of blood rushing forth.

Air burned through his chest as he felt the weight of desiccated flesh and bone upon him. He still couldn’t breathe. He struggled to free himself. Snow was in his clothes and sharply cold against his face as he tried to push the dead away, gasping.

With his axe, he took a head and hand from the closest one, and the temporary relief was enough to allow him to go forward and scramble to his feet. He could feel blood running warm down his neck, soaking the fur at his collar.

A wight charged him. He cut it in half, and then he bolted.

He could feel stinging pain and cold where they had clawed at him. His knee throbbed painfully as he ran as fast as he could back in the direction of camp. He could still hear the wights behind him.

Shouts up ahead told him that the camp was already alerted to the dead just before another wight crossed his path, diverting him east with a screaming, tongue-less mouth. He skidded to a stop behind a tree, flipped the axe around in his hand with a deft toss, and then swung it wide into the wight’s path.

The head was severed clear off its body, but both pieces continued to move, each focused on him independently. He wanted to vomit at the sight.

Stepping forward, Gendry placed himself beside the detached head and brought a boot down hard. He felt the crunch of bone and dry sinew beneath his heel as the body stilled and fell apart.

He started to run again, tripping once. Blood dripped into the snow. He felt it running down his neck still. The shouts of his party were faint and distant, and he could hear the high-pitched screams of the dead between them.

Gendry looked down at his axe as he tried to catch his breath. He knew he would certainly be dead if another group of them caught him alone. He had to try and get back to Tormund and the others.

Yet the more he tried, the farther they seemed to be, until after hours of running and fighting and running again, he heard them no more.

Chest heaving, muscles tense and tightened, he collapsed against a fallen tree to catch his breath and his bearing. He had no choice now but to try and make it back to Harrenhal on his own.

He was shaking and it wasn’t from the cold. He could still feel the wights on him. He still smelled the dead flesh and saw the horrifying eyes shining bright in the darkness. The pounding of his heart seemed to beat against his chest with such force he thought it might bruise him.

He focused on the handle of the axe in his hand. He couldn’t lose this. It was his only weapon and his only tool. His dragonglass was gone. His pack was gone. His group was gone.

Gendry closed his eyes and leaned his head back against the tree behind him. Tormund and the others would not waste time looking for him or anyone else that got left behind. It was the necessary, logical way to ensure that most of them survived.
He sighed, the breath shaky as it left him, fogging out in a wispy cloud. They had left Harrenhal a fortnight ago, but it should take him less than half that time to return while on foot, and cutting as straight across country as he could manage. He tried to recall everything Tormund had taught him.

A snap of a broken branch cut sharply through the darkness. The wind blew colder. Gendry scrambled along the fallen tree, crawling backwards on all fours, trying to make as little noise as possible. Blood trailed behind him, and he tried to kick dirt and snow over his tracks as he went. Quietly and slowly he hid himself deep in the branches, hoping his black leather and furs were enough to keep him obscured from view.

For a long, interminable moment, the world was still and silent.

He heard footsteps before he saw any of them, slow crunching in the snow that began to build, surrounding him on all sides. Then the dead began to shuffle past, paying no mind to the disturbed snow and bloodied tracks he’d left, nor did any of them look to the place where he had hidden himself. They walked by in a gruesome, steady procession.

Gendry clutched the handle of his axe so tight that his fingers ached. He hardly dared to breathe.

In the moonlight, he saw something glinting. It was not the stark white bone of the others, but metal, and the dead man appeared much more recently dead than the others.

A soldier in gold.

At first, there was only the one. But then more came, and one became dozens and then soon it was over a hundred of the dead Golden Company soldiers moving past.

It seemed to take hours for the sounds of them to fade, and Gendry waited in his hiding place for just as long afterwards in an abundance of caution. The blood on his neck and face was cracking and sticky, but there was nothing he could do about that now. All he could do was keep going. Keep going or he would die. He pulled himself up, checked the skies, and headed east.

He ran for most of it; as fast a pace as he could manage until he could not bring himself to do so any more. The leeward side of a large tree surrounded by brush was shelter for a time while he tried to catch his breath and sleep a bit, but even as exhausted as he was he barely got any rest. His body was tense and he startled at every small crack of branches or shudder of wind. Each movement, each sound that he did not himself create was a wight, in his mind.

When he closed his eyes he tried to think of her, but all there was for him was dreams of dead hands grabbing at his clothes, trying to tear him apart.

Run, rest, run.

Twice he got sent far off course to avoid the dead. It seemed like every couple of hours he was forced to hide with little warning as roaming bands of wights appeared through the trees. Occasionally he would be spotted and forced to fight; his axe growing dull quickly from the frequent impact into hard bone.

The dead hounded him through the trees, forcing him from hiding places and terrorizing his dreams when he was briefly afforded an opportunity to rest. The moon rose and set and rose again; and with each passing hour he felt as if he were losing his mind.

He was terrified. He was starving. His limbs ached deep.

Instead of blue eyes, he tried to think of grey ones. Instead of dead hands grabbing at his clothes, he
thought of hers, warm and soft, running over his skin.

He had to get back to her.

One step.

And then another.

The fifth time the moon began to rise, Gendry heard fighting and shouts of the living.

The sounds of horses.

He surged forward with everything he had; air burning through his chest. A wight screeched at him on his left, and he swung his axe hard into it’s skull as it rushed at him. He snapped the weapon back with a swift jerk, pulling the head from the body with a sickening crunch of splintering bone. He smashed it against the trunk of the nearest tree. The body fell to the ground in a heap.

It hardly caused him to miss a step, and he flipped the axe round again with a toss of his hand as he continued forward.

Another half a mile more, and then a riderless horse came tearing through the trees in front of him. Shouts grew louder. The clash of steel and the ringing of dragonglass echoed in the night.

Clouds swept past the moon as Gendry burst into a clearing to see a melee, the moon shining through the branches of the trees in pale streaks.

“Get back!” he heard someone shout out above the chaos. He saw Jon Snow there, on a horse, his red cloak the only color in the moonlit darkness. More horses were behind him, and Jon barked a sharp command that Gendry didn’t hear or understand.

Dothraki rode past in force, war cries ringing through the night, the horses attempting to surround the men on foot. Jon rode forward, a dragonglass spear in his hand, but wights in golden armor pulled at his saddle. The horse reared back and bolted, separating Jon from the rest.

Without a second thought, Gendry rushed forward just as Jon was unseated and thrown into the snow, skidding to a stop between him and the dead. His axe found its mark, slowing the wight, and he pushed it back hard. It fell, and Gendry brought his foot down hard to smash the bones of its face. It stilled.

Quickly, he turned around to offer a hand to Jon. Eyes wide in recognition and surprise, Jon grasped his forearm and Gendry pulled him to his feet.

“I don’t suppose you have spare dragonglass on you,” Gendry asked him, noticing that Jon’s eyes lingered on the wounds to the side of his face. He supposed it must look horrifying. “I lost mine.”

Wordlessly, Jon pulled a long dagger from his belt and handed it to him. The black stone glinted and brought Gendry his first real comfort since he was separated from his group. He held the glass in one hand and his axe in the other, waiting.

“You look like hell,” Jon said, finally recovering from the shock of his sudden appearance.

“Makes sense,” Gendry replied, his voice hoarse. “I feel like hell.” He stepped forward and shoved the dragonglass into the face of a wight, finding a grim satisfaction as it crumpled into bone and dust. Jon came up behind him and dispatched another two in quick succession with his spear.
One of the Dothraki shouted something, and Jon replied with a sharp decisiveness. With a breath, he steeled himself to fight again.

Gods, he was tired.

A step forward, and then another, and he slashed out at the next dead man, the dragonglass carving a swift path from shoulder to hip. It was satisfyingly easier to rip through them now that he didn’t have to dismantle each one with a dull axe and his bare hands.

More Dothraki and some Northerners burst through the trees at the far side of the clearing, and for a moment Gendry and Jon were surrounded by chaos. He felt Jon’s hand grip his arm and he flinched in reflex, his mind briefly consumed with terror before he remembered that he was no longer in any danger.

Relief and exhaustion overcame him and he began to shake. He sank down to one knee in the snow, his hand still clenched tight about the axe handle, chest aching and heart pounding.

He heard Jon say something to one of the closer Dothraki before he knelt down in front of him.

“Gendry,” he said, a hand resting on his shoulder. “Are you alright?”

It took him a long moment to respond as he gasped for air, each breath ripping through his chest as if he’d been underwater for an extended time.

“I-” he breathed out, finding it difficult to speak. “I’m fine.”

This time it was Jon who offered the hand, pulling him to his feet with a strong, confident grip of his forearm. “Tormund thought you were dead,” he said quietly.

Gendry didn’t really take offense to that. His survival surprised him too. “They made it back?” he asked, glad to hear the news.

“Aye,” Jon confirmed. “They lost two others aside from you. Came tearing into the castle with the dead on their heels. That’s why we’re out here.”

He took several deep breaths. “Does everyone think I’m dead?” he asked quietly.

Jon was silent a while. “Yes,” he said. He clearly knew exactly why Gendry had asked. He turned to one of the Dothraki and seemed to ask a question, though he did not tell Gendry what he said. The bloodrider rode off into the trees.

He felt some measure of companionable grief at what Arya must have felt to see Tormund return without him. He needed to get back to her.

“How far from Harrenhal are we?” Gendry asked.

“As far as an hour’s ride.”

Gendry looked back at the last of the wights in the near distance, screeching as the Dothraki rode them down and tore them apart. “So close,” he murmured, a sick feeling brewing in his stomach.

Jon seemed to be of much the same mind. “Aye,” he agreed. “We don’t have much time. How many did you see?”

He sighed. “Hundreds, at least.”

Jon sighed. “Likely what’s left of the mercenary regiment in the Westerlands.”
“There’s something else as well,” Gendry continued after a moment, wanting to get it out before he collapsed. “I saw something in the forest. A symbol laid out on the ground, made from parts of the dead.”

Jon snapped up to look at him. “What did it look like?” he asked, stopping in his tracks.

Gendry tried his best to recall. “A seven-pointed spiral,” he answered, and tried not to think about glowing blue eyes and gnashing, broken teeth. “There was another one, but I didn’t get a good enough look at it before I—” He took a breath to steady himself. “Before they attacked me.” He saw Jon’s eyes again flick to the wounds on the side of his face. Dried blood pulled at the hair on his face and neck and tugged unpleasantly at his skin.

“I’ve seen that sort of thing before,” Jon murmured. “The spiral. Arya and I found one up by the Long Lake a month before they came to Winterfell.”

Arya. He needed to see her. “What does it mean?” Gendry asked instead. “The symbols?”

Jon sighed and ran a hand over his face. “I don’t know,” he replied.

Quite a large number of people were in the courtyard when they rode into the main Harrenhal gates, and he could barely distinguish where he was going in all the chaos. Jon reached forward and grabbed the reins of his horse to pull them both forward together, heading towards the stairs that led to the main Hall.

“What are all these people doing here?” Gendry asked over the sounds of the crowd.

“The dead you’ve been fighting have been pushing smallfolk towards us for a fortnight,” Jon explained.

Gendry looked at the people they passed and saw that they were indeed all smallfolk, clusters of them huddled together, tense and afraid, clutching whatever belongings they’d been able to carry.

He saw Tormund and Beric standing near the stairs to the main Hall, and the Wildling grinned broadly when he caught sight of him. “You made it back,” he called out as he and Jon approached. Gendry watched the man appraise the side of his face. “Well, most of you,” Tormund amended.

Gendry could only nod as he swung himself down from his horse in a weary, ungraceful fashion. The Wildling embraced him tightly and briefly as Beric clapped a hand to his shoulder.

“Your Grace!” Gendry heard Ser Davos call out before the older man pushed his way through the crowd. Gendry could barely see the top of his head. “What news?”

“We’re alright for now,” Jon told him. “Combed the forest for some miles out and tracked down all the dead we could find. How many more have arrived?”

“About two hundred folk, in total,” Davos replied. “About seventy came in ahead of you just in the last few hours. We’re working on getting them out of the courtyard if we can.” Ser Davos turned to see Gendry now, his face immediately one of unabashed relief. “Seven hells, lad,” the older man said. “What happened to you?”
“We found him about ten miles from here,” Jon explained. “He saved my life.”

Gendry was slightly uncomfortable with the attention and the praise. He wanted to see Arya. He wanted to rest. He hadn’t been fighting for honor or recognition; he was just trying to survive.

Jon seemed about to speak further, but his eyes were drawn to something behind him. “Arya!” Jon called out, his voice cutting sharply over the noise.

Gendry whirled around to see her halfway up the stairs. It took her a moment to see him, and a plain, all encompassing relief flooded her face. He began to push himself forward through the crowd without a second thought, desperate to get to her.

Arya disappeared as she took the stairs back down to the courtyard, but she was running towards him now, darting around people and carts, and horses. He’d barely taken three steps before she was there before him, launching herself into his arms. He closed his eyes and held her as tightly as his remaining strength would allow. He felt her taking deep, shuddering breaths.

“You’re not allowed to die,” she said. Her tone was a firm command, though it wavered with heavy emotion. He felt her hands tighten on him.

Arya released him just enough to lower herself back down to the ground, but she did not let him go. She looked up at him, relief and horror flashing across her face in equal measure.

“I’m alright,” he whispered, snaking an arm tight about her waist and running a hand through her hair. A lover’s embrace that left no doubt as to their understanding. He kissed her with a fierce and desperate longing. The tragedy of politics or the expectations of propriety and station didn’t seem to matter. He could have died out there in the forest. They could both die in the wars to come. “I love you,” he murmured against her lips, kissing her again. He had to say it aloud.

It seemed important for her to know.

Chapter End Notes

I know, I know, I skipped another Sunday. I have nothing but terrible excuses.

thanks for your patience, and also thanks for reading and caring about this story even though the show is back on now. hopefully it's not weird lol

let me know what you think.
Jon VIII

Chapter Summary

Jon learns a horrible truth.

Chapter Notes

breaking tradition and going with a note at the beginning because:

1) fuck tradition

and 2) you don't need my snark ruining the end of this chapter, which is an important event that the rest of this story is based upon. it is one of the three major plot ideas that motivated me to write this story in the first place.

if anyone is still reading this, feel free to leave complaints in the comments. also, friendly reminder that I only read AGOT so I'm not 100% up to date on book lore but I do google things on occasion to make sure my bullshit is somewhat plausible

Jon VIII

Arya and Gendry’s reunion was mostly lost to the chaos and the crowd around them, but Tormund was quick to point it out. Jon watched, briefly, with a mixture of several conflicting emotions.

“At least they’re out with it now,” Ser Davos said blithely.

“Aye,” Jon acknowledged with a sigh, turning away. He saw Tormund eyeing the two of them with some measure of amusement, but Jon could not bear to watch. It wasn’t that he was uncomfortable with the display of affection, just that witnessing it, having it confirmed, made the situation with Syros Santagar even harder to bear. He looked to his advisor. “Where’s Sansa?” he asked. He needed his sister’s counsel.

“In the main Hall, last I saw of her,” Davos replied.

Jon let out a breath and began to walk towards the stairs. “Let’s go inside,” he said to Arya and Gendry as he passed them, motioning for them to follow. “Ser Davos, see if you can find some food and a maester to meet us in the Hall. We tried to patch Gendry up as best we could but he could use someone more knowledgeable than I.”
“Aye, your Grace.”

“I’m alright,” Gendry said, protesting a bit. “I can-“

Jon stopped and turned to him. The wounds to the man’s face and neck were grisly to behold even now; four deep lines from ear to collar, red and angry. Gendry would bear those scars for the rest of his life. “After what you told me, I am amazed you continue to stand,” he said abruptly, but not unkindly. “I will rest easier when you’ve been looked after.”

“What happened to you?” Arya asked, her voice soft but her eyes were hardened steel as she looked at the wounds as well.

Despite his calm demeanor, Jon recognized the fear in Gendry’s eyes. Fear was normal. Fear was a natural response to such things. He had left with Tormund and returned changed and warped by his experience.

“He looked death in the face and told it to fuck off,” Tormund supplied in answer, clapping the injured smith on the shoulder with some measure of pride. Jon saw Gendry wince briefly, a flash of pain that he tried to keep to himself.

When the smith had appeared through the trees and saved his life, Jon felt in that moment he was given a glimpse of the Robert Baratheon he’d heard tales of as a child. Gendry had ripped apart a wight with his bare hands, practically feral and covered in blood and gore, his eyes wide with fear and the drive to live. He understood fully now why so many had followed Robert into war, why so many recounted tales of his prowess, why Robb would constantly want to reenact the battle at the Trident when they played as children, insisting that he was the king as he defeated Jon, over and over, forced to play as Rhaegar Targaryen.

The irony of that did not escape him, looking back.

“Arya,” Jon murmured. “I need you to do something for me.” Her eyes slowly pulled away from Gendry to acknowledge that he addressed her. She waited, silently, for instruction. “Go find Ser Jaime and Grey Worm quick as you can,” he asked. “Tell them to come to the Hall. I would have them hear what Gendry has seen.”

She was reluctant to leave, but she nodded in acceptance of her task. Jon took her place at Gendry’s side as she left, running off down towards the Unsullied camp. Wordlessly, he helped Gendry up the stairs and refused to hear protests to the contrary. It was a short walk into the Hall, but even as they got to the doors he could feel that Gendry was leaning on him more and more, his limp pronounced and his exhaustion obvious.

“My apologies for this,” Jon murmured as guards pushed open the doors ahead of them. “But I’d like to have as much information as you can give us.”

“I understand.”

Sansa was already in the Hall as Ser Davos had said, speaking with Daenerys and Tyrion. All three of them looked up in shock as Jon helped Gendry into a chair. “I’m calling a war council,” he told them curtly, before turning to one of the bannermen nearby. “Find me a map,” he ordered. “Now.”

Daenerys walked forward, concern mixed with plain relief on her face. She placed a chaste kiss to her temple as they embraced.

“They are coming,” he murmured to her, quietly enough that only she could hear. He held his wife tight for a moment longer before releasing her, worry and fear sitting deep in his heart.
Their child would come before the next full moon, and the dead would soon follow.

A raven from the Eyrie had confirmed that the Night King’s army was seen on the edge of the Vale, marching for the Trident. Further pleas to Cersei had gone unanswered, as expected. Requests for aid from other smaller houses were met with counter demands: favor, titles, his sisters.

The dead had lain waste to the North. They marched as a wave of death, consuming everything from the wall to the Neck. Each day brought less and less smallfolk to their walls as more and more fell to the Night King. Despite everything he had done, despite the horrors that so many had witnessed, war still raged for him on two fronts. The great bulk of Cersei’s remaining forces remained in the Reach and the Crownlands, successfully preventing anyone south of King’s Landing from providing aid, and also making any tenuous connection Jon had with Dragonstone too dangerous to risk.

Cersei’s rumors and propaganda spread across the kingdoms, painting him and Daenerys as warmongering zealots bent on enslaving Westeros under a reign of dragonfire. Reports from Lord Varys were sparse and incomplete as ravens were lost to the increasing winter storms.

His anger and helplessness burned within him. They were running out of time, and still the kingdoms were fractured. He’d only managed to get two others to ally themselves with him, but it took his army appearing in the Riverlands and the Westerlands nearly falling to the dead for them to truly understand. Would he have to retreat all the way to Sunspear to get the rest to believe him?

His reluctant reply to Syros Santagar, agreeing to his terms, remained unanswered. With the signing of his name Jon had condemned Arya to a life she loathed and he hated himself for it. Still, it was beginning to look as if it were all for naught and his war council did little to ease his fears. The dead could break amongst the walls for weeks and it would do nothing if they couldn’t kill the Night King, and they were no closer to doing so than they were at Winterfell. If dragonglass and Valyrian steel could not work, then what could?

He needed to speak to Bran.

“Theon isn’t due back for another week at least,” Sansa said, walking beside him and easily keeping up with his quick pace.

“I know.”

That was the problem; they only had one way to speak with Bran, and only one person who could navigate the cold mist of the God’s Eye lake. Though he had many accomplished sailors at his disposal, it was the directions Bran had given Theon that they needed and did not have.

“I’m not sure we can afford to wait for him.”

“I know that too.”

They were walking through the courtyard and turning off down towards the lesser used area of the castle. The easternmost part was in the worst shape and provided enough discretion for what he was planning to do. He’d spoken of his intentions to no one but Daenerys and wanted it to remain that way. He stepped over some debris and turned to offer his hand to Sansa.

Rhaegal had answered his call earlier with some degree of enthusiasm. Jon could feel the warmth of
the dragon’s presence in his mind growing closer and closer.

“If you already know everything then, do you mind explaining to me what we’re doing out here?” Sansa asked him. “You’re acting very strange.”

Jon sighed. “Since we cannot wait for Theon to return, we’re going to have to fly there,” he replied.

Rhaegal’s wings boomed in the distance, and Jon watched his sister’s eyes widen in realization. “You can’t be serious,” she said, staring at him as if he was mad. Rhaegal keened loudly in the distance, and Sansa jerked her head towards the sound. And then, choking a bit, she let out a concerned, disbelieving “We?! ”

“He won’t harm you,” he told her as a shadow passed across the moon.

“How can you know that?” she murmured, her voice tense.

“Because he does what I ask, generally speaking.” Rhaegal swooped above them again, lower this time, and Jon felt a hint of the dragon’s thoughts through their connection. The beast was thrilled to be flying again without pain and excited to see him. Jon felt an urgent call to something deep inside, a primal, instinctual feeling.

“What do you mean, he does what you ask?” Sansa demanded. “How is that possible?”

Jon let out a breath and silently asked Rhaegal to land before turning to face her. “Do you trust me?” he asked.

Her eyes were wide as she clearly struggled to come to terms with what was happening. “Yes,” she said finally, though hesitant. “Yes, I trust you.”

Rhaegal landed on the ground before them. The earth shook beneath his feet. Jon looked at his sister now and let out a breath. He offered her a hand. “Don’t be afraid,” he assured her. “I won’t let any harm come to you.”

Sansa stared at his hand for a long moment before she reached out to take it, gripping it like a vice. They approached Rhaegal slowly. “Brienne’s heart would stop if she knew what I was doing,” she said, an attempt at bravado to stave off her fear.

“Do me a favor then, and don’t tell her,” Jon replied. “I need all the good fighters I can get.”

He stepped up close to Rhaegal, pulling Sansa with him. Glancing back he saw her eyes were wide with terror but also with amazement. He continued on and upward to the dragon’s back, showing her where to grab hold, where to plant her feet, how to sit.

“Hold on tight,” he told her, looking back, shooting her a reassuring grin. His body was tight with excitement and a match to the dragon beneath him. He reached out to grab a spine in each hand. “Alright,” he murmured quietly to Rhaegal. “Let’s go for a ride.”

The dragon launched into the air.

It was a wonderful, amazing thing, to fly. Never in his life had he felt something so freeing, so exhilarating. He’d had dreams of it since he’d ridden up with Daenerys on their way to Last Hearth, waiting for the opportunity to do so again, but this time was different. This time the bond between him and Rhaegal was burning in his mind a thousandfold. He could feel it in every part of his soul as if he himself was a bright flame.
Rhaegal seemed to know where Jon wanted to go without him having to give any direction. The icy black lake glittered below them as they soared into the air, the warmth of the dragon warding off the chill. He looked back at Sansa to see her face full of wonder as she stared up at the stars, the moon bright as they broke through the low clouds. A smile broke out across her face as she caught his eye.

\textit{Just wait until you see what’s coming}, he wanted to say.

The mist hung just as thick and ominous up here as it did on the lake, protecting the magic of the island on the other side. Rhaegal seemed not to care much about it and dived straight through.

The warmth of the sun was still a shock to him, even though he was prepared for it, and he used one hand to shield his eyes as the sudden brightness temporarily blinded him.

Behind him, Sansa gasped.

He opened his eyes slowly, blinking, as Rhaegal soared over the tops of green trees, roaring out in what he could only describe as delight. He could see the bright red cluster of weirwoods ahead, but he bid Rhaegal to fly around towards a clearing he remembered some half mile to the west.

When they landed he offered Sansa a hand to help her climb down, but she didn’t need it. He followed her to the ground, jumping down the last bit of distance with a soft thud into the grass.

His sister whirled around to face him as Rhaegal took off into the skies again, keening loudly and triumphantly. Her face was a mix of shock and awe at her surroundings. “Arya said,” she murmured, disbelieving, stripping off her gloves frantically to hold her hands out into the sun. “She told me about this place but I didn’t want to believe her.” Her eyes were wide as she stared at her hands. Her hair and the furs of her cloak were damp from being iced and then quickly melted. Her hair shone in a bright, flaming red. She knelt down and touched the grass at her feet, running the green blades through her fingers with reverence.

“Aye,” Jon agreed, unable to keep a smile from breaking across his face. “Never thought I’d be jealous of Theon Greyjoy.”

She stood to brush her dress smooth in the front and tucked her gloves into her belt. “Are they very far from here?” she asked.

“A half mile,” he said. “Unless they’ve moved somewhere.”

Bran was only a shadow of himself.

He was too thin. That was the first thing Jon noticed as he and Sansa entered the weirwood grove. Bran’s cheekbones were sharp against his skin, which was pale and sallow even in the bright sunshine. He seemed to be the same white as the bark of the weirwood he lay against. His clothes fell loose off his shoulders, and his eyes stared out past him as if he didn’t see Jon at all, but something else far off behind him. He was lost to the past.

Sam and Theon both looked up at them in surprise as they approached.

“How did you get here?” Theon asked. He wore no armor; only soft leather that had once been his usual summer garb. A sword was belted to his side and a bow and quiver of arrows lay against the tree beside him. There was a camp set up in the middle of the clearing, with a large tent open in the front and a campfire smoldering close by.
“We came on Rhaegal,” Jon said, striding forward quickly to kneel at Bran’s side.

Theon looked back behind them, clearly expecting Daenerys to be following.

Jon looked to Sam, whose eyes were alight with curiosity. He knew exactly how they’d gotten here and was clearly burning with unasked questions. “I need to speak to Bran,” Jon said, getting straight to it. “The dead are getting closer. We have a month, if that, to prepare.”

Sam’s curiosity disappeared immediately and he leaned forward to gently touch Bran on the shoulder. “Your brother and sister are here,” he whispered, the words floating in the air over the meadow.

Bran’s eyes focused on them slowly, and as Jon met his eyes he saw nothing of his brother was left in there.

“You brought Sansa with you,” Bran said quietly.

“Yes,” Jon replied, trying to sound normal. “She never forgave me for leaving you here. You know how she is.”

There was a horrible, lingering silence.

“No,” Bran whispered quietly. “I don’t.”

At his side, he felt Sansa stiffen. He glanced at her briefly to see her face set in expressionless stone, betraying no feeling. She moved towards Bran, kneeling down at his side to embrace him. Bran did not return it; only stared over her shoulder at Jon with a steady focus that was beginning to make him uncomfortable and uneasy.

“You need to come back with us,” Sansa urged their brother as she pulled back. “Please, Bran. You’re not doing well—”

“I can’t go back,” he said quietly. “I need to stay here.”

“You need to be with your family,” she insisted.

“I need to speak to Jon,” Bran said. “I’ve seen it. I know what to do.”

Jon let out a breath of relief. “To defeat the Night King?” he asked, and Bran’s answering nod of assent flooded him with a warmth of great relief. Finally, something. “How?”

Sansa sat back in the grass and took one of Bran’s hands in hers. He didn’t seem to notice. Jon moved closer as well, kneeling down by her side.

“As long as light exists, so does darkness,” Bran began. “One cannot be without the other. Such is the balance of the world. History is marred by the constant battle. Life and death. Fire and ice. It began long before there were men in this world, and will continue long after there are no men left to suffer it.”

“It doesn’t feel so much like a balance right now,” Jon said.

“The Children created him, you know,” Bran continued as if Jon hadn’t even spoken. “The Night King. Once he was one of the First Men.”

Jon frowned. “I thought the Children fought against the dead, together with the First Men.”
“So much of what we know is wrong,” Bran whispered. “About the Long Night. The Children.” He held piercing, unblinking eye contact. “Wars fought and men vilified for lies that other people told and passed to their children.”

“History is written by the victors,” Sam murmured quietly.

“Yes,” Bran acknowledged finally. “But I can see the truth.”

“Tell me what I need to do,” Jon pleaded.

Sam opened the book on his lap now, holding it open outwards to show him and Sansa. On it, a drawing of a familiar dagger.

“That’s Arya’s,” Sansa said, immediately recognizing it and turning to Bran. “The dagger that Littlefinger gave you.”

Bran gave her only a slow blink of confirmation. “That dagger is all that remains of Dark Sister, the sword of Visenya Targaryen.”

“According to what Bran has Seen, Valyrian steel is made by forging blood-coated steel,” Sam added. “And not just any blood; it has to be heartsblood, from someone with magic.”

Jon stared at him. “So each Valyrian steel weapon represents the death of someone else?” he asked, taken aback by the gruesome discovery. “Am I understanding you right?” He wondered whose life had been taken to forge Longclaw.

“Yes,” Sam replied, similarly affected.

“So why is this of special significance?” he asked, staring hard at the drawing.

“He can only be destroyed by Valyrian steel,” Bran said.

“We tried that against the Night King before,” Jon reminded him after a long pause, tense at the memory. “It didn’t work.”

An understatement.

“Longclaw failed you because it wasn’t the sword you needed,” Bran said. “Valyrian steel, wielded by a descendant of the one killed to create it, is the only way.”

“We have Dark Sister,” Sam said quietly. “And two of those descendants.”

“Who?”

“It was a Targaryen,” Bran said. “A man nearly inconsequential in the great history of time, but he was tall, a dragon rider, and fire did not burn him.”

Silence sat amongst them, heavy and oppressive. He could feel Sam looking at him.

For the first time since Winterfell, victory seemed attainable. “And that destroys him forever?” Jon asked. “Using that weapon - then it’s done?”

Bran looked up at him, still unblinking, as if he stared right into his soul. “No,” he said. “It only sends him back beneath the ice until he has strength to rise again.”

Victory and relief faded and were quickly replaced by frustration. It didn’t end the Night King, it
only made him the problem of someone else. “Is there a way to break the cycle for good?” he asked. “Or are we doomed to continue this cycle forever?”

The stories of the Long Night clearly weren’t prophecy, they were a warning that no one cared to listen to until it was too late. Would the tales of this war also descend into naught but children’s stories?

A glance at Sam showed he was of much the same mind. “We can strive to warn those that come after us all we like,” his friend said to him. “But it doesn’t mean people will listen.”

Jon turned to Bran. “Can I end this?” he asked. “For good?”

Bran looked at him for a long time. “To end him forever also means the end of magic for all people,” he said. “For as long as magic exists in any form, he can return.”

There was a heavy silence. “What kind of magic do you mean?” Sansa asked. “The kind that made the swords?”

Bran gestured out all around him to the green grass and golden, muted sunlight through the trees. “How do you think this island remains immune from winter?” he asked. “How do you think it is that the Children lived north of the Wall for centuries without dying? Magic lay dormant in the world for ages, coming up once in a generation only to fade again. But, years ago, on the other side of the sea, something powerful was woken from stone. And it is that power that the Night King rose in answer to.”

There was only one thing Jon could think of, and he felt the bleak, cold anxiousness envelop him as he prayed desperately that he was wrong.

“What power?” Sansa asked.

“I think he means the dragons,” Jon murmured quietly.

“Yes,” Bran said. “The dragons. Only one left now. But Rhaegal is not the only source.”

“What else?” she asked.

“Me,” Bran said quietly.

Jon looked sharply at him. “What?”

His brother looked at him with a calm expression. “Being able to see the past and present is not a natural thing.”

“Is there a way~”

“Death,” Bran said simply, cutting him off dispassionately. “That is the only way.”

“No,” Jon snapped in complete denial. “No.”

“It must be,” Bran replied. “The gods have been relinquishing their power to mortal men for years as they prepared for this event. The Red Priests of Asshai poured all their power into one vessel, who used it once to save your life and the lives of others at Winterfell. Their connection to the fire is gone with her, never to appear again. The powerful magic that protected the Wall, and the very foundations of Winterfell, were destroyed by the Night King himself.”

“What about Jon,” Sansa asked, the words soft and grief stricken, clearly hesitant to even voice her
thought aloud. “Is it not magic that has awoken him from death twice over?”

Jon felt eyes on him. “Jon is magic’s victim, not it’s vessel,” Bran said.

*Victim certainly was an accurate term,* Jon thought darkly. Then a horrifying, singular thought crossed his mind; stealing his breath and stopping his heart. He saw, in his memory, a vision of Daenerys at Last Hearth: her clothes aflame as she stood upon a burning cart, her Valyrian commands ringing through the courtyard and coursing through the depths of his soul. A moment that had seared itself so brightly in his mind that he thought he’d not forget it as long as he still lived.

Bran stared at him, unblinking, as if he already knew his thoughts. “Yes,” he said. “A woman who can walk through fire and not burn. How else could dragons wake from stone if not by magic?”

His hand clenched tight at his side. Eyes stared piercingly at him as a horrified, understanding silence crept through the group. Jon was beginning to see how previous attempts at this had failed.

*Love is the death of duty.*

He wanted to vomit right there in the grass. He barely registered the light touch of Sansa’s hand upon his arm, meant to be comforting. He didn’t look up to meet her eyes. He didn’t look at anyone but Bran. “Are you telling me my wife has to die?” he asked, his voice low and angry.

“If you want to defeat him for good,” Bran said, his voice even and devoid of any sympathy or knowledge of the impact of his statement. “Then yes, she must.”

Jon stood up suddenly, unable to continue kneeling there and desperate to be alone. He stumbled away, ignoring the calls of Sansa and Sam behind him, seeking only solitude.

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A bush of winter roses bloomed before him.

Jon focused on the blue petals, wanting to drown in the color and think of nothing else. Last time he was here, he’d brought a flower back for Daenerys, presenting it to her as a memento of the majestic Isle he had seen. She kept it pressed in one of her books now, preserving it.

*It represents hope,* she’d said to him. *Hope that we’ll see the sun again.*

Thinking about her now brought him nothing but grief. Bran’s words echoed loudly in his ears as if he’d screamed them, a tolling death knell that made his knees weak and his chest burn with anger and pain.

His immediate thought was of the loophole Bran presented: the dagger alone would end the Long Night for those here, now, and the great grandchildren of the men and women alive today would not even know such winter. A thousand years would pass before the Night King came again, and no one then would know his name. No one then would know the sacrifice he and Daenerys would have to make.

So why do it?

He heard soft footsteps in the grass behind him, and he didn’t need to turn and look to know who it
was who approached.

“Is it you?” Sansa asked without preamble. “Are you the second Targaryen?”

It was not what he expected her to ask, but he wasn’t surprised that she had picked up on what Bran had said. Jon stared at the blue flower for another moment longer before turning to face her. The expression on her face was unreadable. “Yes,” he answered, his voice low and quiet. “It’s me.”

She let out a breath. “I thought so,” she murmured. “I saw your face when Bran said House Targaryen had two living descendants.” There was a pause and a heavy silence as she waited for him to explain.

He didn’t.

“You weren’t surprised to hear that,” she pressed.

He looked back to the winter rose. “No,” he said. “I’ve known for some time.” He paused, still at the precipice of the truth, wondering if it was wise to speak it aloud.

“How?” she asked. “Did Bran tell you about your mother?” The tone of her voice was curious, desperate, as he once had been, to know the truth.

Jon knelt down and pulled one of the roses from its place with a light snap of the stem. “Twenty three years ago,” he began, “Ned Stark returned from fighting in Robert’s Rebellion with two things: the body of his sister and a child.”

“You,” Sansa acknowledged. She had heard the story before.

“Yes,” he said. “And he never spoke of where I came from. Not to me. Not to your mother. No one. Why do you think that is?”

“I heard someone say once that he loved your mother deeply,” Sansa answered. “And that it grieved him so to mention her.”

Rhaegal was soaring above him, the beat of his wings a distant echo. “That’s true,” Jon answered. “But not in the way that everyone thought. My mother was Lyanna Stark, you see,” he said, turning to face her. “But Ned Stark is not my father.”

A dawning understanding spread across her face, and for a moment she was speechless. He could see the same emotions in her face that he had also struggled with: the feelings of confusion, sadness, and disbelief as a singular truth once held dear was suddenly ripped away, causing uncertainty and unbalance. He knew that she realized what the cost of the truth had been. He could see it in her eyes, calculating all the things she thought she knew, all the clues she thought led some certain way but were now revealed to be something completely different.

“The story we were told about Lyanna and Rhaegar was wrong,” he continued, handing the flower to her. “He didn’t kidnap her; they ran off together. They loved each other and married in secret.” The words were coming out through clenched teeth now and he tried to stay calm. “I’m not just a bastard of some other man, I’m trueborn. I have a name.” He sighed. “It just wasn’t the name that I wanted.”

Sansa seemed to be dealing with a multitude of emotions, but she kept herself calm and collected as she spoke to him. “So Robert’s Rebellion was a lie,” she murmured. “All those lives lost, the Seven Kingdoms forever changed because of a lie.” She looked at him with a serious expression. “The Iron Throne would have been yours.”
“I couldn’t give less of a damn about that fucking throne,” Jon said vehemently. He was tired of people even bringing it up. “Aegon Targaryen, Sixth of my Name.” His fists were clenched hard at his side. “The name that my mother gave me causes me nothing but anger and grief. I was lied to all my life, but since I learned the truth I’ve wished I’d never known it.”

There was a long pause before Sansa spoke again. “Did you tell Daenerys?” she asked.

“Yes.”

“And?”

“Clearly we worked it out,” Jon replied.

She ignored his sarcasm. “Who else?”

“Besides Sam and Bran? No one else,” he confirmed. “And no one else will know.”

Sansa closed the distance between them. “Why?” she asked. “Why not speak of it?”

Jon frowned at her. “I thought you of all people would understand why,” he said.

Her expression changed from concerned sympathy to the annoyed one he was so familiar with. “It would be dangerous to reveal it were you and Daenerys not married,” Sansa conceded. “But you are married. It would create no succession crisis to speak the truth.”

“We’ve had a hard enough time convincing people that Daenerys isn’t a mad tyrant like her father,” Jon pointed out. “I don’t think that declaring myself as a Targaryen as well would improve matters.”

“Are you concerned about the North?”

“Of course I’m fucking concerned about the North,” he snapped. “Do you honestly think they’d listen to a thing I said if they didn’t believe I was the son of a man they so admired? Even now, at the end of the world, do you not think they’d abandon me the moment I confessed I wasn’t one of them?”

“This truth doesn’t erase everything that you are,” she protested. “You’re just as much the son of Ned Stark that everyone thinks you are. He raised you, he taught you, and you look like him.”

He could barely remember what Ned Stark even looked like. “What, frustrated?” he said, only half serious. “Weary?”

“No,” she replied, rolling her eyes at his sarcasm. “Older. Like you’ve aged ten years since Winterfell.” A pointed jab at his attitude.

He sighed. “Thanks,” he said acidly.

“Then stop being difficult,” she said. “You know what I mean. Anyone who looks at you knows you’re a Stark.”

“I’m not a Stark.”

“I’m not a Stark,” she repeated, slightly mocking. “Don’t be ridiculous. You’re just as much a Stark as I am.” She looked at him with a hard, meaningful stare. “But that doesn’t mean you can’t also be Aegon Targaryen.”

“Don’t call me that.”
“Why? It’s your name.”

If he still held the flower he would have crushed it in his hand. “It doesn’t matter what my name is,” he said angrily. “Jon Snow or Aegon Targaryen - we still have a war to fight. The Night King doesn’t care if I have a claim to the throne or not. I-” His voice choked in his throat. “And I’m not sitting on that damn thing without her.”

A tense, quiet stillness settled between them. A long moment passed, and then Sansa placed a hand on his arm in comfort. “We’ll find another way,” she murmured. “There has to be another way.”

“There isn’t,” Jon replied, pain in his heart that was so sharp and fierce he could hardly breathe. “The gods are not that kind.”

They watched as Rhaegal’s shadow disappeared into the darkness, and Jon listened to him fly off long after he’d gone from view. Finally, he turned back to face Sansa. The tall, looming, structure of Harrenhal behind her was lit with torches, and so large was the castle that a good number of stars were blocked out of the sky from where he stood. It would take the better part of an hour to walk back up to the main courtyard.

“Sorry I landed so far,” he murmured to her. “But I don’t really want the questions it would bring if I arrived outside the main gate.”

She looked up the path. “Yes, it likely would distract your council from the more urgent problems at hand,” she agreed. Then Sansa looked at him for a long, serious moment. “What are you going to tell her?”

Jon ran a hand down his face. “Just about the dagger,” he murmured. “The rest I would appreciate if you could keep to yourself.”

Sansa nodded in understanding. “Of course.”

They began to make their way up the winding path, the waning moon lighting the ground before them for brief moments before it was obscured by thick clouds. Another storm was coming soon.

“I’m not sure how I could have made it through since Winterfell without you,” he admitted truthfully, breaking the silence that had settled between them. He felt the need to thank her for some reason; her steady presence at his side had kept him from going completely mad. Not just at the Isle, but for months. Years, really, if he was being honest. Though they fought, it was always important and he was grateful that she wanted her voice to be heard. She kept him level and grounded.

His sister scoffed. “You would have managed fine,” she said, waving a hand as if to brush the matter away.

He stopped, and she stopped with him. “Sansa, trust me when I say that I’m serious,” he told her. “And after what we just learned-” The ever-present burning in his chest seemed to intensify. “After that I-”

He couldn’t even continue; it was too much to even contemplate. He could not let Daenerys give her life for this. It was too high a price.
Sansa embraced him without a word, her arms tight about him as if she could squeeze the pain away with the gesture.

“What kind of man does it make me,” Jon murmured quietly into her shoulder. “That I would want to stay the Night King to save us only, and not end him for good?”

“It makes you...normal,” she said quietly and hesitantly. “And I don’t think it makes you cold hearted or evil not to want to sacrifice so much for people you don’t know, and who won’t even understand the magnitude of what you have done for them.”

She agreed with him, and yet he still felt like a monster as he condemned another generation to the horrors that they themselves suffered now.

“You’ve heard the stories,” she continued. “Others have tried and failed before. Perhaps it’s not you that’s meant to carry this burden, but another in a time to come.”

It was a blanket reassurance without much meaning, but he took some comfort from it all the same.

He needed to compose himself before he saw Daenerys again. He rested his forehead on Sansa’s shoulder for a long, weary moment, allowing himself the measure of peace it gave before pulling away. “Let’s get you back into the keep,” he said finally. “I’m sure others are wondering where we are.”

They continued walking further up the stony path along the lake in silence, and Jon tried not to let his thoughts consume him. The weight of it all was crushing, as if someone was laying heavy stone upon his shoulders one at a time, building and building and building.

How long until he could no longer carry it?

So absorbed was he with his own grief that he hardly noticed when a group of Freefolk appeared on the path before them.

“What are you headed?” he asked as they passed. They usually roved around the western area with the Dothraki and it was strange to see them this far out to the east.

“Hunting, your Grace,” one of them said.

“Aye,” Jon acknowledged, distracted by his own turmoil. “Stay close.”

They parted and he began to lose himself once more to his thoughts, until Sansa spoke up.

“Have they always called you that?” she asked quietly, her voice curious.

“What do you mean?”

“The Freefolk. That man addressed you as ‘your Grace.’”

Jon stopped short and turned to her. He saw the frown of confusion between her brows. “He did, didn’t he?” he murmured. Looking back down the path, he saw the group had disappeared into the night. He’d never been addressed as such by any of the Freefolk before. It was always ‘Jon Snow’ or ‘King Crow’ if it was ever anything at all. A strange, uneasy suspicion began to creep into the back of his mind, and he saw that same feeling plain on Sansa’s face. “Let’s hu-“

The soft, swift sound of an arrow cut sharply through the air. It snapped by his ear and he immediately reacted. “Run!” he said, pushing Sansa hard in front of him up the path. “Go!” She looked at him for the briefest moment of shock before moving, and he pushed her again roughly as
another arrow shot by them. “Go!” he said again.

Three steps forward and an arrow hit him hard in the lower back, knocking him to the ground. His palms scraped roughly on the stone as he fell hard onto his hands and knees.

“Jon!” Sansa called out desperately.

He tried to push himself up to his feet, and Sansa was there in a rush to help him, her hair and cloak billowing out behind her. “Go without me,” he urged her. “I’m right behind—”

The breath was knocked from him as he was hit by another arrow. Sansa’s hands were tight on his arms as he fell again and she tumbled down with him. He tried to keep focus through the haze of pain and fear and his desperation to get his sister out of danger.

“Come on, Jon,” Sansa said, scrambling to help him. “I’ve got you.”

“Please get out of here,” he hissed at her. “Run!”

He tried to stand, but pain shot through him and he sank lower to the ground. Sansa’s grip on him tightened as she tried to hold him upright. One hand on his arm, another behind his back.

Men swarmed them faster than he could get to his sword, forcing him back to the ground and ripping Sansa away from him. His scabbard was torn away and he could hear Sansa struggling against her own captors. His heart beat fast as he tried to get his bearings, but the pain of the arrow wounds made his vision warped and unclear.

Arms pulled him back sharply as Sansa lunged forward, the glint of steel in her hand. She had taken the dagger he kept sheathed at his back. He watched in horror as Sansa stabbed the closest man in the neck, blood spraying over them all, warm and wet. She pulled the dagger back out, slowly and with the hesitation of inexperience, as the man she killed crumpled before her.

That hesitation cost her everything.

His shout of warning was not enough. He watched, desperate and horrified, as another man slashed forward with his sword, the hilt inlaid with gold.

For a moment, he thought the man had missed and he felt relief.

Then a thin red line appeared at Sansa’s throat, growing bolder and bolder until blood spilled forth in a gruesome waterfall, coating her skin and collar.

“Sansa!” he called out, struggling from where he was held, his heart beating irregular and wild. The pain from the arrows was inconsequential compared to the pain of seeing his sister fall.

She hit the ground hard, holding her neck, the blood oozing through her fingers.

He called out for her again, his voice breaking, one hand reaching for her as it scrabbled against the worn stone beneath them. “No,” he cried desperately. Tears stung his vision. “No…”

His captors held him tightly, one arm secured behind him and a knee pressed hard against his spine, pinning him to the ground. He reached for her, and she for him, slowly, her eyes fixed on his.

Blood stained the ground and still he struggled against their hold. Blood reached his hands faster than Sansa did. Blood burned within him as he watched his sister die.

Her fingertips brushed against his own, just barely, a weak touch. Jon watched in helpless horror as
her eyes lost focus and her breath left her. A cry of anguished grief ripped from him as he struggled still to free himself.

Then everything went black.
Jaime II

Chapter Summary

Jaime struggles as Harrenhal starts to feel the consequences of Cersei's wrath

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Jaime II

It was colder.

The wind bit and swiped at him mercilessly as he stood upon the northern wall, plucking at every small piece of exposed skin, finding every crease and vulnerability in his clothing. The sky was clear, for now, but the way the wind howled down from the north he knew a storm would be upon them soon.

He shivered. In the distance, he heard the long, keening sound of a wolf howl carried upon the wind. It sent chills up his spine in a way the cold could never do. It was mournful and enduring, and he felt the palpable grief of it deep in his bones. Poor animal, he thought. It is not just the hearts of men that feel the cold grasp of this endless fucking darkness.

To his left stood Grey Worm, unflinching and unmoving as always, and Tyrion was between them. His brother noticeably shivered in the cold as well, pulling his cloak about him tightly.

“You know, sometimes I wonder if you’re made of stone,” Tyrion commented to the Unsullied Commander, breaking the silence. “Doesn’t the cold bother you?”

“I cannot change the weather,” Grey Worm replied.

“Just because you can’t change something doesn’t mean you can’t have an opinion about it.”

Grey Worm was silent. “The wind does not bother me,” he said finally. “It is what it brings that I do not like.”

Jaime could agree with him there, though he personally had strong opinions about the wind as well.

Shouts from below echoed up to where they stood, and Jaime glanced down to see a company of Unsullied working at finishing a collapsible bridge over one of two rows of wide trenches. Farther down, one of four new trebuchets was being erected just outside the walls.

Trees had been cleared in a quarter-mile expanse from where they stood, and more would be felled still in the coming weeks. The wood was used for repairs, for fires, and for weapons; men and women worked constantly in shifts and Harrenhal was always a moderate flurry of activity.

When there was no way to denote the passage of time beside the waxing and waning of the moon, it
had been hard to establish any sort of shift schedule or to keep any sort of consistency. However, Tyrion liked to comment that the nature of man was the comfort of routine, and after some time at Harrenhal Jaime came to see that he was right. The people there had settled into their own ways without much oversight.

This far south the snowfall was light and nearly non-existent, mostly trampled into dark mush with the amount of activity that swirled about the keep. The lull of the past few months had been a welcome reprieve, but war would be upon them again soon.

Jon’s last council had been one of tense urgency; the Wildlings had brought back reports of the dead swarming in the Riverlands like wild bands of wolves, consuming whatever they could in their path. They’d never made it to the Westerlands as originally planned, though it appeared the intended reconnaissance would not really be necessary. A gilded vambrace was brought back as proof of the Golden Company regiment’s gruesome demise.

Jaime was of two minds about this development. On the one hand, it neutralized one threat they had worried about, but on the other it was an ominous, horrifying reminder that something worse was out there.

He sighed as he looked out over the preparations he had coordinated. Trenches. Dragonglass crossposts. Trebuchets. Pitch. Traps. Fire. All of them only temporary measures that would only delay the inevitable. The dead would swarm the walls just like before.

“Our enemy doesn’t tire. Doesn’t stop. Doesn’t feel.”

Jon Snow’s words rang in his mind; made worse in the absolute knowledge that the man had been right. How could you defeat an enemy that would never need to rest? How could you keep up strength of forces when every man or woman that falls rises again, stronger and against them? It was a nightmare.

Thankfully, they did still have one small advantage. The sole remaining dragon was still on the side of the living, and had recently made it clear that it was able to fly without much issue. It came around occasionally, swooping around Harrenhal’s melted towers, the beat of its wings and the echoes of its cries the only hint in the darkness that it was there. The only issue with this, in particular, was that the only person able to ride a dragon was currently in no condition to do so.

Daenerys Stormborn of House Targaryen. She looked very much like her mother, Jaime thought, from what he could hazily remember of the last Targaryen queen. They had the same stature, the same face. Yet where Rhaella had worn a soft and caring expression, her daughter was stern and serious and unyielding.

All good traits, for a queen at war.

And a queen at war she was. She had called him to her many a time in the last months as she read through all the books she could find, asking his opinion on troop movements and strategy as she followed the Golden Company’s march across the Reach as best she could, scrolls of information from Lord Varys on Dragonstone littering tabletops in front of her.

“I have received a raven that informs me the Golden Company is pulling back from the Reach to regroup in King’s Landing.”

Jaime looked at the map between them. “Are these updated positions?” he asked, pointing to the
wooden markers that denoted the enemy troops.

Daenerys nodded. “Our best estimate based on Varys’ information.”

Tyrion walked around the table to stand beside the drawing of King’s Landing. “I can think of two reasons why she’s doing this,” his brother said. “Either she’s confident that the Reach is fully under her domain, and, based on her losses in the Westerlands, is regrouping for another push to block aid to us. Or, she is preparing to defend King’s Landing against siege by the dead.”

Daenerys turned her gaze to Jaime, eyes piercing and serious. “Which did you think is more likely?” she asked him.

Jaime felt all eyes in the room on him as he thought about what to say. Tyrion. Jorah. Ser Davos. Jon was, as was growing increasingly usual, absent; preferring to spend his time and efforts working amongst his men rather than discussing strategy at length. “To be honest, I think my brother is giving her too much credit,” he answered finally. Daenerys raised an eyebrow and waited for him to continue. “Cersei is not a military mind. She deals in political schemes and intrigue, not war.”

“Does she not have advisors?”

Jaime didn’t know if she did or not, but he had a pretty decent guess. “When I left, she was already beginning to isolate herself,” he replied. “I don’t think she listens to anyone. She wouldn’t even listen to me.”

“Then what do you think she is doing?”

In his mind, Jaime remembered the sight of Maidenpool crumbling into itself, the horrible stain of green death lighting up the night, and how sick it made him feel. “She going to come after us,” he said bluntly. “Harrenhal is closer, and in her mind we are her biggest threat.”

“How can she possibly think that?” she frowned in some measure of disbelief. “After everything that’s happened?”

Jaime sighed. “I think you are underestimating the impact of smallfolk opinion,” he replied. “Even traveling to Winterfell months ago I was hearing the stories told in taverns and on roadsides. If she gets rid of both you and Jon Snow, then she can take the credit for saving Westeros from the dead. But if not, and it comes down to a war between you and her, she will find herself losing support in droves.”

Daenerys rapped her fingers against the top of the wooden table as she contemplated this. “So what do we do?”

“We can try speaking with her again,” Tyrion suggested. “Surely there’s some possible way to come to an agreement.”

Jaime scoffed. “You might as well endeavor to put the sun back into the sky for all the good that would do,” he said.

“You believe she won’t ever see reason?” Daenerys asked. She was looking for honesty.

“No,” Jaime replied flatly. “I don’t. The dead could swarm at her gates, and as long as you and Jon both live she would still see you as her greatest threat.”

Daenerys glanced to Tyrion, her expression unreadable. “I have two of Cersei’s brothers here to
advise me, and you both answer me in opposite,” she commented.

“We had two opposite relationships with her,” Tyrion pointed out.

Daenerys frowned at the map again. “I think the last meeting with her proves she is not interested in negotiating in good faith,” she said after a moment. “But I also think she’s clever. We only know these moves she’s made because she lets us see them.”

Jaime agreed. “You think it is a distraction.”

“It could be.”

“I still think we should try speaking with her,” Tyrion pressed.

“Jon and I have reached out more than once,” Daenerys replied, a slight note of irritation in her voice. “How long should we continue on the same path, expecting a different result?”

Her mind was sharp and she took to the game of war quite quickly; always asking Jaime why things were done the way they were, pulling up maester’s accounts of old conflicts, dissecting every shred of useful information that Jaime could give her, and reading every boring treatise she could get her hands on.

In another life, perhaps, she would be a fearsome commander. She had a discerning eye that counteracted Jon Snow’s tendency towards cold ruthlessness, and watching her hone this skill over the past several months had been both encouraging and strange. It was somewhat of a juxtaposition to watch a woman with child be so involved with planning a defensive military campaign.

The wind whipped at him again in a fierce gust. The light of the moon faded as the first of the clouds obscured it. They were small, opaque wisps now, but they heralded the beginnings of more on the horizon. He could already tell that this was going to be a particularly nasty storm.

“You should make sure your men are inside the walls,” Jaime cautioned Grey Worm. “It won’t be long before this gets worse.”

The commander remained still for a long moment. “I should tell my Queen,” Grey Worm said, glancing down at his men below.

He admired the loyalty Grey Worm had to the men that followed him. “I’ll let her know,” Jaime offered. “I’m headed back that way anyway. Go on and see to your men.”

The commander considered this for a moment, clearly debating his course of action. Then, finally, he nodded in gratitude before turning swiftly on his heel and marching off. Jaime did the same, though with decidedly less purpose and discipline, and in the opposite direction.

Tyrion, unsurprisingly, followed him. Jaime slowed his steps so his brother could keep pace.

“You’ve been quiet,” Tyrion noted as they descended the stairs.

“Unlike you, I keep my mouth shut when I have nothing to say,” Jaime replied.

Tyrion seemed unbothered by the jab. “Is it Brienne?”

“What?”
“Is she the reason you spend a lot of your time brooding on walls? Or have you just been spending too much time with Jon Snow?”

Jaime stopped at the bottom of the stairs and turned, annoyed. His brother had been making clever comments to him about Brienne of Tarth off and on for weeks - ever since Jaime accidentally stared at her just a bit too long and he had, unfortunately, been there to see it.

“Nothing is going on between Brienne and I,” he said, hoping his tone was harsh enough to encourage Tyrion to drop the subject.

“Is that not the problem?”

Jaime sighed. He had been spending quite a bit of time with Brienne since Winterfell. They occasionally rode together. Sometimes they would eat together. And, every so often, they would train together. Of course, he’d seen her looking at him too. There was something there that was obvious and undeniable, and neither of them made any move to address it.

Despite this, Jaime still craved more, and desperately. It took all of his effort not to probe further on it, to let their conversations linger just a bit farther into whatever it was that lay beyond their companionable friendship.

It was a problem of his own making, however. Brienne kept close to Sansa Stark, as expected, but he was determined to keep his distance from the Starks as much as he could. It wasn’t that he didn’t like them, either - it was that he did. The isolation was necessary to keep his head clear. He’d pledged to fight the dead and that was all he’d sworn to do. After Maidenpool, he had told Jon he would help fight Cersei only insofar as she interfered with that campaign. He tried not to make himself available for anything other than military strategy; he didn’t want to hear about her or what she’d done, or what was likely to happen to her should Jon and Daenerys succeed in eventually taking the Iron Throne.

It was his hope that the dead would come for them first, and either he would die in the siege or afterwards he would be able to send himself quietly off into exile. Bran would tell Jon and Daenerys about Cersei’s child, the boy had assured. Jaime felt the girl would be better off growing up without knowing him at all. He knew that Tyrion would make sure she had the life she deserved.

He let out a frustrated breath and shook his head. “Brienne would do well to stay far from me,” Jaime said flatly before turning around again and continuing on.

The path towards the main keep was made narrow as carts and tents lined every space there was possible for carts and tents to be. A group of children sat around a pile of material, binding arrows. Nearby, Lord Glover was coordinating a group of Northmen as they shored up the collapsed roof of one of the smaller stone buildings. It had once been a storehouse, but now it would shelter refugees from the Riverlands.

A month from now it could be destroyed by the dead.

They turned a corner to cut through the forges on the way back to avoid having to climb over a pile of half-assembled pikes. As Jaime called back to have someone move them from the path, he nearly ran into one of the blacksmiths.

“Apologies, ser,” the young man said. It was Gendry.

“Don’t worry about it, my fault,” Jaime assured, stepping aside to let him pass. The wounds to the side of the smith’s face had partially healed in the time since he’d returned with Jon near a week ago,
but the obvious mark of clawed fingers gave him a dark, horrifying presence even with all the blood
cleared away. He tried not to stare as Gendry nodded and continued on.

“Surprised he’s back in the forge so soon after what he’s been through,” Tyrion remarked. “That
story he told was horrifying.”

Jaime agreed; a lesser man would certainly have died. So would a greater man, come to that.
“Haven’t you been the one saying that routine is a source of comfort? I suppose he would want a
sense of normalcy,” he said.

Tyrion let out an amused snort. “This is considered normal?” He gestured around the crowded keep,
full of women and children and weapons of war.

Jaime shot him an irritated look. “You know what I mean,” he admonished. “You go through
something like he did and it...changes you.”

There was a short silence as Tyrion glanced off down the direction Gendry had gone, then he went
to his belt and unsheathed a dagger. “In any case, he’s a very good smith,” Tyrion told him, handing
him the weapon. Jaime took it, admiring the balance and the craftsmanship of the handle; the
dragonglass blade glittering black in the torchlight, the glint of shining steel in the hilt. “Apparently
he trained in King’s Landing under Tobho Mott.”

Jaime knew the name and reputation, but he was surprised to hear that Gendry had known him.
“He’s not a Wildling?” he asked.

“No, but he does look like one, doesn’t he?” Tyrion conceded thoughtfully. “Anyway, interesting
lad.”

“Didn’t think you made a habit of talking to smiths.” Jaime offered the dagger back to him, hilt first.
The dragonglass was smooth to the touch.

“I think anyone who’s brave enough to bed Arya Stark is a man worth knowing,” Tyrion shrugged,
taking his weapon back and sheathing it.

He raised an eyebrow. “Is that true, or is that just your own speculation?” Jaime had a hard time
imagining that Jon Snow would let a smith anywhere near his sister in such a way.

“It’s true,” Tyrion replied. “Get Tormund drunk enough and he’ll tell you anything. It’s amazing
what you can learn when you ask the right questions.”

“I thought Arya Stark was pledged to the Dornish king.”

His brother sighed and it was almost mocking. “Yes,” he replied. “It’s all very tragically romantic.
Perhaps you can give Gendry some advice on how to fuck a queen behind her husband’s back.”

Jaime shot Tyrion a glare; though it was half-hearted at best. “Sometimes I despise you,” he said.

“A family tradition.”

Jaime decided then that he was going to go talk to Gendry, now, about something that had been
weighing on his mind for months, and he didn’t really want Tyrion to be a part of it. “Go on ahead
and tell the queen about the storm,” he said. “I’ll catch up.”

Tyrion frowned at him, but nodded and proceeded onwards.
Jaime turned and followed down the row of fires and anvils and piles of weapons to the place where he had seen Gendry disappear. The man was pulling out an old sword from a stack of weapons and armor, angling it towards the light of the fire. Jaime watched as he inspected the blade with a critical, discerning eye, a furrow between his brows growing deeper and deeper as the moment went on.

“'You’re frowning at that sword like it offends you in some way,’” Jaime commented, breaking the silence to alert the smith to his presence.

Gendry looked up. If he was surprised to see him, he didn’t show it. His face was shadowed in the firelight, giving him a rakish, warrior-like appearance. “I suppose it does offend me,” the smith sighed, sticking the blade into the fire beside him. “Whoever made it had little care for his work. If we weren’t at war I’d melt it down and refashion it into horseshoes or something more useful.”

Jaime let out an involuntary breath of a laugh. “You still have pride in your trade despite all that’s happened?” He stepped forward into the forge proper now, a bit eager to get out of the wind and closer to the heat of the flames.

He shrugged. “If I don’t take pride in the things I make, then what’s the point?”

“I can respect that,” Jaime said. “An honorable attitude.”

“It’s not meant to be especially honorable,” Gendry replied, grabbing a tool and pulling a white-hot vambrace from the fire. “It’s just the truth.”

Jaime watched as he grabbed a hammer and began to reshape the piece, each blow striking accurate and true, the strength of each one powerful and clear. A niggling sense of familiarity sat in the back of his mind just then, and he spent several moments trying to place why. Perhaps he’d seen him in King’s Landing, though he couldn’t remember ever visiting the Street of Steel with any frequency. And why would he remember a smith’s apprentice?

“Is there something I can help you with?” Gendry asked after a moment. “You obviously don’t need your sword sharpened.”

Jaime saw him glance at the hilt of Widow’s Wail at his side. “Yes, I have come with a request,” he began, loosening the buckle on his sword belt. “And it does pertain to this sword.”

Curiosity flickered across Gendry’s face as he quenched the vambrace and set it aside.

“Have you ever worked with Valyrian steel before?” Jaime asked, pulling his sword and sheath fully away from him now and handing it over.

“I’ve not.”

Gendry took the weapon with some degree of reverence and appreciation. Jaime watched as he pulled the blade out about a handspan, plainly admiring the dark waves of the steel. “This sword belonged to Joffrey,” Jaime told him, hoping he was making the right decision. “It’s one of two swords made from Ned Stark’s Valyrian greatsword, Ice.”

The smith blinked in surprise, pausing in the act of sheathing the sword again. “Why are you telling me this?” he asked. He clearly understood the significance. Good.

“Because I want it to go back to the Starks when the war is over,” Jaime answered seriously, trying to convey with his tone that no, this was not a ruse or a joke. He’d been thinking about this decision for months, in fact. “Seeing as you are so loyal to the remaining members of that House, I thought it fitting you be the one to refit it into something more...appropriate.” They both glanced down at the
elaborate gold lion’s head on the pommel.

“All the smiths here are loyal to the Starks,” Gendry said after a moment, sliding the sword back into its sheath. “Not just me.”

“They’re not the ones spending the end of our world still bothered by low effort craftsmanship,” Jaime pointed out as he took the sword back. “I saw the dagger you made for my brother. This needs to be handled by someone who cares. I’m sure you understand.” The farther he got into this conversation, the better he felt about it. The seriousness of the man’s face, the earnest, plain loyalty that shone there, all told him that he was making the right choice.

Gendry let out a slow breath. “I do,” he said.

“Also, I’d prefer it if you keep this between us for now,” Jaime continued, a bit delicately. “I don’t want to be relieved of this by some prideful northerner until the fighting’s done. I’ve only got the one hand, you see, and I need all the help I can get.”

The smith was staring at him, clearly torn between surprise and disbelief. “Understood,” he said finally.

There was a short silence as Jaime continued with his assessment of the man, still trying to place where he’d seen him before, prior to the war. That feeling that they had met grew stronger and stronger the longer he looked at him, and yet he still found no relief. “Have we-“

Shouts interrupted him, loud and wild, and the clashing of swords. Gendry reacted immediately, pulling an axe from the cache of weapons racked to his left and walking out to the open air. Jaime followed, a hand on the hilt of his sword.

There was the beginnings of chaos in the row of forges all the way up to the courtyard. Gendry swore under his breath, taken aback at what they saw. Jaime heard footsteps behind him and turned, unsheathing his sword in a quick movement to block an arcing swing that would have carved the smith in two. The strength and power of it was jarring and unexpected at the present angle, and Jaime felt it shake the length of his arm.

It was a Wildling that had come with such force, big and brutish, a snarl on his face and murder in his eyes. Jaime stared at him in shock for just a moment before pulling his sword away and slashing forward in attack. Behind him, he heard Gendry yelling for someone. Jaime hoped the smith was as good at dispatching living men with an axe as he apparently was at dispatching the dead.

He fought the big Wildling for longer than he expected he would have to. They were hardy folk, and decent fighters, but they were not known for their swordsmanship. This man, however, blocked every trick that Jaime could think to throw at him. He slashed across the front of him when he finally landed a blow, sending blood spraying across the walls and hissing into the hot coals of a nearby fire. The counter swing glanced off Jaime’s upper arm, earning him a shallow wound that stung sharply.

Another sweep of his blade caused the Wildling to stumble back out of the way, and that was when Jaime seized his chance. He thrust his sword forward and felt it punch through furs and armor and bone, sliding through his attacker’s chest and out the other side with ease.

He pulled his sword out with a grunt and kicked the man to the ground as others began to stream into the narrow alleyway. He recognized Lord Glover at the forefront, and the man wore the same look of disbelief that Gendry had. The Northman shouted for him above the chaos, looking from Jaime to the dead Wildling at his feet. There was still fighting going on and he had no idea why.
“The Wildlings started attacking,” someone answered as Jaime tried to catch his breath. He turned to see another one of the smiths with a nasty cut across his forehead. Blood was steadily running into his eye. “I came out to see that one attack the Wildling smith and him-“ he gestured to Jaime.

“I’m not one of the Freefolk,” Gendry said sharply in correction, appearing on Jaime’s other side and staring down at the man. He was breathing hard and the axe in his hand dripped blood into the snow. “And neither is he.” The smith knelt down beside the dead man and ripped away the furs with a swift jerk, exposing a leather and gold breastplate.

Jaime immediately felt the sharp, cold sting of dread, and a hundred thoughts ran through his mind at once. How was this possible? How did they get in? Why were they here? How many of there were there? He had answers for none of it and everyone was looking at him to provide them. His heart pounded against his chest as he tried to contain the rage and anger that was threatening to conquer him. He looked down to Gendry. “We need to warn the queen.”

Instead of responding, Gendry stood and pulled him back sharply out of the way of yet another swinging blade, saving his life. Up ahead, he could hear someone calling the smith’s name.

“Arya!” Gendry called back, the tone of his voice ringing loud over the sounds of fighting.

The Stark girl burst through the crowd, her own sword covered in blood. She drew her dagger and threw it, the blade whirring sharply through the air to sink solidly into the Wildling behind them, not even skipping a beat as she followed immediately after it, wrenching it from the man’s throat without a practiced jerk of her arm. Upon closer inspection, he saw the glint of golden armor peeking through the furs.

It was impossible to tell who was friend and who was foe. Snow blurred the darkness as the wind picked up and the incoming storm began to blow in. He and Gendry and Arya fought in the difficult space between disarmament and death; people were attacking others with such betrayed ferocity that they were in just as much danger from those thinking the Wildlings were actually attacking than from the disguised Golden Company.

It was a clever plan, he admitted with a forlorn sense of defeat, using his golden hand to hit a man across the side of his face; it was not a killing blow, but it had certainly crushed his jaw. Jaime watched, chest heaving, as the man crumpled to the ground.

The madness only grew. Jaime was starting to worry it would spread too far to control; it was impossible to escape the narrow confines of the alley. He had no idea if anyone had gone to warn the queen of it at all; or if the fighting was contained to just the forges. Had the Golden Company managed to infiltrate them so completely that they could never recover? Would this be the end of them all, after everything they had prepared and everything they had endured, just to be goaded into slaughtering themselves out of fear?

Out of the corner of his eye he saw Arya Stark pull herself up onto one of the wooden awnings, hooking a leg across the wooden beam to steady herself. She was watching the scene with a sharp eye, a bow drawn and an arrow set in perfect readiness.

Jaime wondered, somewhat idly, what Ned Stark would think of her.

Then, over the chaos, he heard Grey Worm shouting commands. Unsullied answered in perfect unison. They pressed forward into the riot, one marching step at a time. Jaime pushed people out of his way as he tried to get to the commander, but there were still plenty of others fighting between them. A man came at him with a knife and Jaime didn’t have enough time to bring is own sword forward to block it. It seemed an interminable moment as he tried to decide which way to go to
dodge the blade, but before he could make any sort of movement the man jerked backwards with an arrow sprouting from his arm, the knife falling to the ground. He glanced back to see Arya nocking another arrow.

Grey Worm had the riot stilled and controlled in short order. At the end of it, forty seven men and women lay dead. Less than half that were Golden Company soldiers, easily identified by the gilded armor and fine-wrought weaponry hidden beneath tattered furs, all killed in the row of lean-tos that had made up the forges. Grey Worm told him that the fighting had spilled out into the courtyard, but none of the Golden Company men had made it that far. All the death that had occurred outside the alley was the consequence of what the Golden Company had wrought: their own people killing each other.

“And the queen?” Arya asked, leaning upon Gendry for balance as she adjusted something on her boots. The four of them stood at the end of the row, assessing the damage.

“Safe,” Grey Worm replied stoically. “The enemy did not make it into the keep.”

*That we know of, Jaime thought darkly. Who knows how long these men had been hiding here in plain sight, waiting. It didn’t matter now anyway; the damage had been done, and they would likely never recover from it. No matter what they did, no matter how much effort and manpower they poured into guards and patrols, the sense of insecurity and violation would never ease. So very clever of you, Cersei,* he thought to himself in disgust.

The main courtyard was a mess of frightened and chaotic activity as people tried to clear away the aftermath of what had happened. Daenerys Targaryen stood stock still before the scene, clad in furs like some great Northern warrior. Yet, instead of the anger he was expecting to see, he saw only sorrow and grief.

At first, he thought she was taking the deaths of her people deeply and personally, and while she was a caring woman, her sympathy did not run so deep as to wear such despair on her face for Wildlings and Riverlanders that she did not know.

Then he saw that she was not looking at the general courtyard at all but directly at the three of them as they approached.

Specifically, she was looking at Arya.

The younger Stark pushed forward in front of him and Gendry, rushing to the queen. “What’s happened?” she asked desperately, fear that hadn’t been present in the fight now plain in the tone of her voice.

Jaime had a sinking feeling as they climbed the steps. *Who had died?*

He and Gendry both held back as Daenerys took Arya’s hands in hers and murmured quietly to her.

For a moment, neither moved, but then Arya dropped the queen’s hands and dashed towards the keep in a frantic, desperate rush.

Sansa’s body had been found near a mile outside the eastern walls. The Lord Commander of the Night’s Watch had been the one to find her, following the lead of a distressed Ghost. Her throat had
been slashed open, and judging by her cold stiffness and the dried blood that coated her skin and
clothes, the act had occurred some hours ago. Apparently she and Jon had gone to visit Bran Stark,
wherever he was, and had apparently sailed back too far to the east instead of coming straight for the
dock at Harrenhal proper. And, further to that, there was no sign of Jon anywhere except for his
dagger, clutched tightly in Sansa’s hand, and bloodied handprints on the stone. No one had seen
them leave. No one had seen them return. All that they had to go on was blood and death.

The more he thought about it, the angrier he got. Jaime stalked through the halls like some sort of
restless animal, the feelings of violation and powerlessness that had begun hours ago in the forges
now threatening to overtake him completely. Cersei, in all her manipulative scheming, had preyed on
Daenerys’ desire to help everyone she could, and exploited that weakness to great effect. Jaime
cursed himself for not doing more to prepare against this sort of attack; for it was certainly something
that Cersei would do, and now that it happened he felt foolish for not anticipating it. He had been too
cought up in the honor of military engagement and the threat of the dead that he had forgotten that
there was no place for honor here.

His steps took him to Brienne’s door without him really even deciding to go there. It was a shock to
him as he realized where he was, alone at the end of a hall, a wooden door before him as
insurmountable as the Wall itself. The pounding in his chest and ears faded from a black rage to a
softer, more terrified emotion. It was selfish and stupid of him to be here. He should leave.

Still, he raised his hand to knock.

He froze just before he made contact with door. He couldn’t do it. Jaime let his hand fall back to his
side, defeated.

When he turned, Brienne was there at the end of the hall, staring at him.

“Is there something I can do for you, Ser Jaime?”  she asked. Her voice was full of pain and grief.

“I-“ he began, suddenly speechless. “I don’t know why I’m here.”

She walked slowly towards him, her boots making dull thuds on the stone as she approached.
Wordlessly, she pushed open the door to her room and held it open for him, a silent bid for him to
enter.

He hesitated, briefly, but he did accept the invitation against what he felt to be his better judgment.

“I’m sorry about Sansa,” he said to her as the door closed with the quiet sound of wood on stone. “I
can’t imagine what you must be feeling.”

Brienne walked across the small room to stoke her fire back to life. It was a long moment before she
looked back to him. “I should have been with her,” she said quietly. “I swore an oath to protect her
and I failed. After all this time, I failed.”

The heartbreak and guilt in her voice tore at his heart. He walked forward to take one of her hands,
seized with the urge to comfort her and not quite sure how to go about it. “It wasn’t your fault,” he
said, insistent, squeezing her hand once. “She was with her brother, who is one of the greatest
fighters I have ever seen. If he couldn’t protect them both, then-“ He swallowed. “Then you would
likely have died as well.”

“An honorable death, in service of an oath.”

“A foolish one,” he argued. “And that would just mean we suffer another death we cannot afford.
You’re a great fighter. We need you.” I need you. “And there is still a Stark girl yet living.”
“Arya doesn’t need me,” she said.

“If you had died, then I would be down there with Arya Stark, grieving for you,” he murmured. “I cannot possibly tell you what your loss—" "

Brienne let out a choked sob, dropping his hand and covering her face. Her shoulders shook, and he felt her pain like a knife in his own heart.

“I’m sorry,” he murmured. “I’m so sorry.”

She let him guide her to the edge of her bed and they sat together for a long while, the silence broken only by the soft crackling of the fire.

“Why did you come here?” she asked after a long while had passed. It was not accusatory, nor was she offended. The question was simple, as if she merely inquired after his health or some other polite, simple pleasantry, but he could hear the desperation for an answer hidden in the way she asked it.

He didn’t want to meet her eyes but he forced himself to do so. “Because I was lost and confused, and the only time I don’t feel that way is when I’m with you.” He let out a breath. “I was selfish, thinking only of my own comfort and not of the pain of your own that you must have. The last thing you need is to bear the burden of my feelings on top of everything else.”

“I didn’t say it was selfish,” she replied quietly. Her hand brushed against his. “What if it comforts me to have you near?”

This was a dangerous conversation but he couldn’t bring himself to end it. “Does it?” he asked. He could feel her eyes on him, but he could only stare at the flames in the fire.

“Yes,” she whispered.

His thumb brushed lightly against the top of her hand, and he turned to look at her. She was still beautiful despite her distress. “You deserve better than me.”

“There is no better man than you.”

The sincerity of her eyes broke his heart, as he knew without a doubt that she believed her own words with nothing but complete conviction. He felt a swirling storm of guilt and hope as he seized onto the words she’d spoken, desperately wishing he could believe that truth as readily as she did. Perhaps, if he pretended enough, he could convince himself of it too.

After all, what was one more lie? He’d told so many.

He entwined the fingers of his hand in hers, and the walls they’d built between themselves crashed down into rubble at their feet.
so this was a long ass chapter, but we haven't heard from Jaime in a bit and I wanted to establish more of where my personal adaptation of him is sitting and his relationships with some of the characters. I wrote most of this before episode 8x02 and tried not to let his subsequent journey in the show affect me too much when editing. I feel that it is important for me to note at this point that Ser Jaime has an actual moral arc in this story, not a circle.

so yeah. the show GoT is over now, but you're still gonna get a couple months more of this story from me if you need something to read. Daenerys is up next. Her POV will deal more directly with the aftermath of the attack and Sansa's murder, and touch a bit on what happened to Jon. Obviously I took Dany in the opposite direction the show did, and honestly that ending turn for her in the last few episodes had me questioning my own sanity a little.

let me know what you think. thanks for reading.
Daenerys IX

Chapter Summary

an end and a beginning

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Daenerys IX

The sounds of the fire in the hearth seemed deafening as she sat in an uncomfortable wooden chair. The smell of blood pervaded the room and made her nauseous, but she did not leave. The wind whistled through the cracks in the stone and the gaps of windows. Black leather and even blacker furs kept her warm enough, but they did not dispel the cold feeling of grief and dread that sat deep within.

Sansa Stark lay atop the table in the center of the room, unnaturally still, her hair spilling downwards off the edge. It fell like a graceful waterfall, the ends of it moving ever so gently, caught by an errant snap of wind that screamed its way inside.

On the opposite side of the room sat Arya. The younger woman hadn’t moved at all; nearly a statue herself. Neither one of them had spoken to the other since they had been left here, alone, to mourn in their silent vigil. Arya for a sister, and Daenerys for a friend.

Daenerys had offered to clean Sansa; to scrub away the blood and dirt. She had offered a scarf of her own possession to wrap about her neck.

Arya refused to agree to either.

“People should see what was done to her,” Arya had said, her voice hoarse and angry. “I don’t want anyone to forget the sight or who is to blame.”

But no one was seeing, not anymore. It was just the two of them here now.

A knock on the door startled both of them. It had been light and soft, clearly conscious of the rooms contents, but in such melancholy silence it may as well have been as loud as a dragonroar.

“Come in,” Daenerys said quietly.

Edd opened the door slowly, his eyes flicking to Daenerys, then Arya, and then to Sansa between them. His face did not hide his own grief and anger, and she knew immediately that it was not good news he brought. Still, she tried to remain hopeful in the moments before he spoke. “Anything?” she asked him quietly.

He shook his head silently in answer. “Tormund and I searched about the eastern country as far as
we dared go. No sign.”

She tried to find relief in the fact that Jon was not lying here beside his sister, but another part of her was desperate to know what had happened and where he was. If he was alive. If she would see him again. She nodded to Edd in understanding. “We’ll look again when the storm has passed.”

As it was, the brewing storm was beginning its first assault on Harrenhal with the cold, icy wind as it’s vanguard. There was no sign of snow just yet, but it was only a matter of time.

Edd glanced to Sansa again briefly. “I was also asked to tell you that everything is prepared,” he continued. “And that we’re running out of time.” He said the last words with regret in his voice; as it was a horrible thing to rush the mourning of one so loved.

Daenerys turned to look at Arya, who stood up with a hard expression on her face, tears wiped away and replaced with a coldness she had never seen in her before. Her grey eyes seemed to harden into steel with the heat of her anger and grief. Her bearing was stiff, as if she wished no one to come near her. Indeed, both she and Edd gave Arya a wide berth as she crossed the room.

“Let’s get on with it then,” Arya said flatly, her words sharp enough to cut stone. “I don’t want her turning into one of them.”

Daenerys rose from her chair with some difficulty, but she tried her best not to make it obvious. The child would come before the next full moon, and carrying it was becoming quite the effort. Edd extended a hand out to provide assistance, but she did not accept. She could yet still manage herself and would do so until she could no longer.

“Where will it take place?” she asked the Lord Commander.

“Down by the docks,” he replied. “Out of the worst of the wind. People have already begun to gather.”

Daenerys left the room with one last glance at Arya, her dark-haired sister in name and in bond. It was not soft words and comforting embraces that she needed now, faced with the death of family. It was not the reassurances of safe passage to another life, nor the comfort that Sansa Stark would no longer be forced to endure the horrors of winter, nor any of the other stupid things people say when trying to ease the irreversible and the unexplainable pain of death. Arya needed a more visceral action. Beneath the steel of her bearing and expression, the fire of vengeance burned. Daenerys recognized herself in that.

There were some others in the hallway when she departed, men standing apart from each other in solemn silence. She saw Gendry first, and he looked up with sorrow and grief painted clear across his face. He held a wordless question about Arya in his eyes, and Daenerys paused briefly before him.

“Will you help bring Lady Stark down to the dock?” she asked him quietly, though her words echoed in the silent hall. Arya will permit no other but family.

“Yes, your Grace,” Gendry replied, just as quiet, and he walked slowly towards the door. Brienne, stiff and silent, emerged from a shadowed place down the hall and followed.

It was mostly Northerners that she passed as she continued down the hall, but at the very end, much removed from the others, stood Tyrion. He looked at no one; his shoulders slumped and no longer carrying the sense of surety and authority that he usually did.

“How is she?” her Hand asked as she approached, his voice cracking slightly, further evidence that
he, too, was consumed by grief. He had been Sansa Stark’s husband, after all, even if the arrangement was only in name and never in practice. Daenerys knew the two of them had, nevertheless, enjoyed a close but cautious friendship, and before she had even arrived at Winterfell - a lifetime ago - her Hand had made clear the esteem he felt for the eldest Stark daughter.

“Arya is angry as she grieves her sister’s loss,” Daenerys replied simply. “As are we all.”

Tyrion was quiet and still for a long moment. “Is it time, then?” he asked.

“Yes,” she replied, unclasping her hands from in front of herself and placing one lightly on his shoulder. “I’m afraid it is.”

Her Hand was mute and melancholy as they walked together, an uncharacteristic and noted silence that spoke more to his own grief than words ever could. His mourning was a palpable sadness that matched her own.

She had not cried, not yet. There would be time enough for tears later, when the pyre was burnt and the words were said, time enough later for her to retreat to her own chambers and weep for her own heartbreak and loss. For a sister and a Lady and a treasured advisor, taken brutally and too soon.

And for a husband and a king and a leader of men, gone without a trace.

The Hall was quiet and subdued, and they passed through it without much disturbance. Jorah was there to meet her at the entrance, standing tall and stoic as he waited for their approach. He opened the door for her as she tightened the furs about her neck to brace against the wind.

“Still no word, your Grace?” he asked her. “Of Jon Snow?”

Daenerys shook her head. “Edd and Tormund have found no sign of him,” she said, making every effort to keep her voice level. “They will search again when the storm has passed.”

“I would assist them, with your permission.”

She glanced up at her knight as he walked beside her. So firm was his offer that she was momentarily surprised; yet Jorah had, on occasion, shown his belief in Jon Snow to be nearly equal to the loyalty he felt for her. She supposed rising from the dead was enough to convert even the staunchest of critics.

“Of course,” she murmured, grateful and moved. She reached out to touch a hand to his arm briefly, hoping it was enough to convey what his words meant to her.

“Do you really think he’s still out there somewhere?” Tyrion asked, his voice dark and quiet. The tone was slightly angry. “If he wasn’t with his sister, and he’s not here, then where else could he possibly be?”

“Tormund thinks he was taken against his will,” Daenerys replied, a harsh note to her voice, warning him that he was on dangerous ground. “But we don’t know that for sure, and I will exhaust all possible efforts to search for him.”

“Of course, your Grace.”

He went back to his silence, and Daenerys decided to attribute his harshness to the pain of loss. It was understandable, if not a bit frustrating. Tensions in the keep were strained at best and frayed to nothing at worst; she was counting on her council and the lords to keep their heads about them. Nearly fifty thousand men, women and children occupied Harrenhal and the surrounding area, and
she would lose what tenuous control remained to her if she could not count on her advisors to keep their heads and their wits.

Tyrion seemed to grasp this without her having to say a word. “Apologies, your Grace,” he said after a moment. “Please forgive my harshness.”

“It is nothing,” she said, waving a hand as if it were merely smoke in the air between them. “But I would take care with your words. We are all grieving.”

She saw the large crowd that had gathered before she even reached the stairs that led to the lakeshore. Thousands of people stood upon the walls and on fallen stone, lining the steps in silence. Torches lit the night, flickering wildly in the wind, hundreds of them dotting the blackness as the three of them descended the steps. Jorah helped her in a kind, discreet fashion as she proceeded, and she was grateful to his steady strength as she tried to keep herself walking firmly and with purpose.

Pain coursed through her middle, tightening the muscles of her body, and she struggled with all her concentration not to let it show. She’d felt this same pain on occasion over the past several hours, but her Dothraki handmaiden assured her it was normal. The child wasn’t due to come for some weeks yet.

At the bottom of the steps, the stone flattened out into a wide plateau where yet more people stood. A great wooden pyre had been built at the edge of the wall near the water. The Wildlings slain in the attack were laid out along it, arms resting neatly and calmly across their chests, evidence of the slaughter still red and raging across their bodies and their clothes.

A space in the middle was left open, slightly raised, waiting for one more.

Ser Davos was at the edge of the crowd, two torches held aloft in his hands. Behind him, Jaime Lannister stood next to Ned Umber, the difference in height between the two making the young lord look exceptionally small for his age. She could see Grey Worm standing just behind them.

Daenerys walked over to Ned, the torch he held showing tears shining bright on his cheeks. “You were not upstairs with the other Northern lords,” she said quietly.

The boy shook his head. “I wanted to help build it,” he replied, looking towards the pyre. “Lady Stark would have wanted me to do something useful.”

She let a small smile turn up the corner of her mouth as she reached forward to pull the boy into an embrace. “Yes, she would have,” Daenerys acknowledged.

“My lords follow, your Grace?” Jaime asked. “The other lords?”


It was not long before movement on the stairs disrupted the cold silence of the gathered crowd, and soon after she saw Edd appear, leading the procession. Behind him was Lady Brienne and Gendry, each bearing one end of a wooden litter on which Sansa Stark lay. Her hair, much like it had in the room, spilled over the edges like thin red waterfalls or like the delicate ends of a swaying willow tree. Arya followed them, her hair blowing wildly about, unbound, her face a mask. The rest of the Northern lords proceeded behind her to stand quiet and still before the pyre.

The silence was palpable as Brienne and Gendry gently laid Sansa Stark in the space that had been left for her. Arya was the one to arrange her sister’s hands across her chest, and she did so with great care; finishing by placing Jon’s dagger clasped between them upon her breast, the point directed towards her feet.
A warrior’s pose.

Then Arya stepped back to stand beside Daenerys, and the world was quiet.

Waiting.

Daenerys stepped forward, taking one of the torches from Ser Davos and holding it up high. She walked towards the pyre and turned to face the gathered crowd. Hundreds gathered on the wide docks, and a thousand more lined the path above them. As she looked up she could see more torches and more people lining the walls to pay their respects.

She stood before the crowd of grieving Northerners and wondered what Jon would say to them if he were here. Would his words be ones of comfort? Or would he be as angry as she, affected so by the violation of the attack, full of despair at being unable to protect those that sought the safety of their walls? As he mourned the loss of his sister, would he vow revenge on those that had taken her from them? Or would he bear his grief in silence?

Her speeches had never been ones of comfort and hope. When she spoke to those that followed her, she spoke of fire and blood and the conquering of her enemies. She spoke to inspire and inflame, and she felt that same fire within her now. She was angry. She wanted revenge on Cersei Lannister, because she knew in her heart that it was her that had done this. She wanted to march to the Red Keep, tear apart the castle stone by stone and pull her out, kicking and screaming, to face justice.

But she could not. She could not mount Drogon and use him to rain fire upon the Red Keep. He was gone, lost to her forever, living only in her heart, and Rhaegal belonged to another. Of three, she had only had one left.

The child within her stirred and moved. There was another yet to come, she acknowledged, placing a hand across herself as if it would protect that child from any harm. It was for this new child that Daenerys strived to remake the world. It was for them that she put aside her hatred and pain and need to avenge the wrongs done to her family. It was for the child, and for Jon, that she would give her life to protect. Her family that yet lived was what mattered, and not the injustice done to the ones long dead.

The burning torch in her hand centered her thoughts, and she concentrated on the heat of it as she faced the gathering of mourners. Northmen and Riverlanders and Wildlings all stood in silence, and Arya stood at the forefront of them all, a torch in her hand gripped tight.

Jon should be here.

Daenerys found the strength in her voice to raise it loud above the wind. “We’ve been dealt a heavy blow,” she began, hoping she could maintain that strength. She felt pain inside her again, hard and sharp, and it took all her will to keep it from showing in her voice. It was not her own pain that mattered.

It’s too soon, she repeated to herself, and with a deep breath, she continued.

“I wish there was something I could say that could repair the damage done. Jon Snow and I urged you to follow us on the promise of protection and safety, and in that we have failed you. I am sorry, deeply sorry...more than I could ever express.”

There was silence at her words. No one spoke or murmured or reacted. Wind pulled at her hair, bound fast in a thick braid, casting loose strands across her face. Her cloak flapped behind her, the material snapping loudly as it was tossed about. Daenerys planted her feet and stood firm.
“We lost good men and women in an attack meant to divide us,” she said. “It was meant to cause us to fear each other and break apart. It was meant to cripple us and make us weak.

“But it will not, because I have faith in us. We have suffered through this Long Night and that has made us strong. We fought at Winterfell and at Maidenpool and even in the very forests of the Riverlands and we won’t let something as small as Cersei Lannister keep us from protecting Westeros from the dead. We will end this war despite her lies, despite her tricks, despite her betrayals. We will defeat her and avenge our fallen brothers and sisters. We will not allow Sansa Stark’s death to be in vain.”

She paused, swallowing to keep her voice from cracking with anger and grief.

“I promise you that I will not let this stand.” She snapped out each word with force. “We will defeat her and have our king returned to us. I will answer injustice with justice.”

Daenerys let her words sit over the crowd. “Sansa Stark and I had recently begun to enjoy a sisterly bond,” she said, trying not to let the memories of her choke the words in her throat. “And my only regret is that I did not open myself up to her sooner. We were all lucky to have known her, to be protected by her, to be loved by her, and her loss leaves a hole that could never be filled.” With a hand she willed not to shake, she held up her torch. “To the Lady of Winterfell,” she said, and a thousand torches answered in a rippling wave. “We shall never see her like again.”

The wind was bitter cold, but she stood firm and waited. Arya stepped forward again, taking the second torch that Ser Davos held. She held it forward a moment before proceeding, walking past Daenerys to stand, frozen, before the pyre.

“You deserved better,” Daenerys heard her whisper before extending the torch forward to the center. The wood was dry and it caught fast. Daenerys used her own torch to light an end, holding it there for a long while as she took in the faces of each of the Wildlings and Riverlanders that lay there. I’m sorry I couldn’t protect you.

Then she stepped back and watched as fire consumed them all.

The storm came swift and terrible, descending upon the keep with a mad vengeance. Daenerys sat in the antechamber of her rooms, resting there at Jorah’s insistence only after she had spent hours walking the halls and making sure they had as many sheltered in the keep as they could manage, and that food and water and other necessities were still readily available.

Sansa had managed to organize a great repair effort in the three months since they’d occupied Harrenhal, and it was solely due to those efforts that so much of the keep was habitable enough now to provide adequate shelter from the winter. While she and Jon and everyone else kept occupied with the threat of war on two fronts, Sansa had seen to it to fight against death by other means: starvation and exposure. Daenerys owed her thanks beyond measure, and there was a hardness in her heart now, filled with regret, as she sat alone and dwelled upon things she should have said and should have done. Did Sansa know if her efforts were appreciated? Daenerys could hardly remember if she’d even bothered to tell her.

Pain rippled through her again, cutting sharply through her grief. She’d sent Jorah to fetch Khirri, a Dothraki midwife who had been helping to look after her. It’s too soon yet. Daenerys tried to push
her anxiety away.

The door opened a short time later without a knock or announcement, a familiarity with her that only Arya Stark could claim. The younger woman came in and closed the door behind her without a word.

“What are we going to do?” she asked without preamble, leaning back against the door.

Daenerys looked at her for a long moment. Her hair was wild, her clothes unchanged. “About what?” she asked quietly.

“About Jon.”

She sighed and leaned back against her chair, tensing up as she felt the same pain again. It was becoming more frequent. “Tormund is going to start another search when the storm has passed,” she said.

Arya looked her dead in the eye. “He won’t find him,” she said. “If he wasn’t with Sansa then he’s not out there at all.”

“Perhaps,” Danerys reluctantly agreed. “But we may yet find a clue as to where he’s gone.”

“You and I both know Cersei has taken him.” There was an absolute certainty in her good-sister’s voice when she spoke the words, and Daenerys was hard-pressed to disagree.

“We don’t know that for sure.”

Arya scoffed under her breath. “The Golden Company attacked us. The Golden Company killed my sister. Our sister. How much more proof do you need? Cersei is behind this. I know it.” She pushed herself off the door and began to pace, her eyes wild and desperate. “I should have gone to King’s Landing instead,” she murmured, half to herself, voice tinged with regret. “If I had killed Cersei when I meant to instead of going home we wouldn’t be in this position now.” Daenerys could see her fists clenched at her sides as she reached the end of the small room and turned. “I went home to my family instead, and now Sansa is dead and Jon is a prisoner.”

“This isn’t your fault,” Daenerys said sharply. “Your past actions have nothing to do with what happened.”

Arya whirled around. “Don’t they?” she challenged. “If Cersei was dead now, wouldn’t my sister still be alive? Wouldn’t Jon still be here with us?”

“We can’t possibly know what could or could not have happened,” Daenerys replied. “There’s no sense wasting time mourning for other actions that could have lead to other futures. We don’t have the power to change the past. All we can do now is deal with the present as best we can.”

Arya’s aggressive stance seemed to deflate a bit, but it was clear that she was not swayed by Daenerys’ words. “Tormund can search the country all he likes,” she said. “But when this storm clears I am going to King’s Landing.”

Daenerys stood up from her chair. “I don’t want you running off to King’s Landing just for you to get caught as well,” she said, a bit harsher than she intended.

Arya’s eyes flashed angrily. “I’m not going to sit here and do nothing.”

“I’m not asking you to do nothing, I’m asking you to wait,” Daenerys said. “I don’t want you going
blindly off on your own, because then I will have lost both you and Jon.” She paused and gritted her
teeth as she felt pain again, sharper and more agonizing than any of what she’d felt before. She
gripped the back of the chair like a vice. “I want Jon home as badly as you, but we need to wait. We
need to be smart about this. We need more information.”

“How do we get more information?” Arya asked, her tone a bit angry and sarcastic. She was pacing
away from her again. “Are you just going to ask Cersei nicely if she’s seen him?”

Daenerys let out a breath and tried to remain calm. She was in pain. She needed to sit. But she
remained resolute and stern as she regarded her. “You have another brother,” she said in reminder.
“And he can tell us what we need to know.”

Arya’s eyes were hard as she turned back. “Theon isn’t due to return for a fortnight,” she said. “That
is too long to wait. Jon could be dead by then.”

“If she was going to kill him he’d be dead now and there’d be no point even talking about this,”
Daenerys argued. “If Jon’s death was her goal then we would have found him in the snow with Sansa-”

Arya was struggling to keep herself together. Daenerys stepped forward. “Please, Arya,” she
whispered, practically begging. “Please believe that I will do everything in my power to bring Jon
back to us. Please trust me.”

“Please don’t do anything stupid.”

The pain was almost unbearable now, and as it surged through her again she was unable to prevent a
gasp as it stole her breath. Arya’s eyes widened, anger evaporating immediately and replaced with
concern. She hurried forward to catch her arm in support.

“I’m fine,” Daenerys said, but it was a lie. The pain was worsening rapidly. She could not hide it any
longer.

“You should lie down,” Arya urged. “Please.”

“I can manage,” Daenerys said, trying to remain upright on her own.

“I know you can,” Arya said, time indicating that she would tolerate no further protest. “You carried
me through the woods and fought off a wolf with your bare hands to protect me. The least I can do is
help you to your bed.”

Blackness darkened the edge of her vision, and she tightened her grip on Arya as she helped her into
the next room. The absence of both Jon and Ghost was noticeable; the wolf was with Tormund,
though, and she knew her kind, silent companion was well. The wolf had been the first to alert her
that something was wrong, jerking up from his usual place at her feet and running off like a white
flash in the night. Tormund has seen him and followed, and it was Ghost that had led him and others
to Sansa’s body.

Pain coursed through her, harder and sharper, and she cried out through gritted teeth.

“What can I do?” Arya asked as she helped Daenerys onto the bed.

“Stay with me until Ser Jorah returns,” she asked, holding tight to Arya still. “Please.”

“Of course,” Arya nodded, squeezing her hand lightly in reassurance. There were a few silent
moments between them as Daenerys tried to keep her breathing level and even. “I’m sorry,” Arya
spoke again, quieter this time. “For yelling.”
“It’s alright.”

It wasn’t long before Jorah returned with Khirri, and her knight was at her side in an instant.

“Jorah,” she murmured, suddenly thrown back to a time long past. She wasn’t a woman or a queen now but a scared girl, frightened and alone. “Jorah, I’m afraid.”

What if it was like the last time? What if she lost this child too?

*When the sun rises in the west and sets in the east. When the mountains blow in the wind like leaves.*

Jorah’s face held nothing but absolute faith. “You are strong, Khaleesi,” he murmured to her in Dothraki, confident and assured. “And your child will be as well.”

The worst winter storm they had yet endured was raging about the keep.

“*Your child comes,*” Khirri said. The fight with the dead at Winterfell had taken her right ear and left her with some serious burns on the upper part of her body. Scarring from those burns peeked out on her neck just beneath the fur collar, and were prominent and angry along her right forearm as the woman pushed her sleeves up to her elbows.

“It’s too soon,” Daenerys protested, her words cut off sharply as agony rippled through her body again. She sat upon the bed, chest heaving with the stress of trying to breathe. Sweat beaded on her forehead and the linen underdress Arya had helped her strip down to was sticking to her skin. “It’s too soon.” She could not keep the worried fear from her voice.

Gentle but firm hands pressed her back against the headboard. She grit her teeth hard and tried not to cry out as another wave of pain consumed her.

“You are strong, Khaleesi,” Khirri said. It had become a mantra to get her through.

Daenerys took another shaking breath. In the corner of the room, Jon’s red cloak lay draped across a wooden chair. A desk stood quietly and serenely beside it, littered with books and scraps of parchment covered in his simple and utilitarian hand, waiting for him to return.

She’d thought it would bring her comfort, but all it did was tear her heart open wider.

*Where are you, Jon? Come back to me. Come back to us.*

The wind howled and snow swirled with such ferocity that it was as if the world around them labored with her.

It was difficult. The most difficult thing she’d ever done. There was a point, there at the end, where she wasn’t sure if she would be able to do it. Everything within her was spent. She reached for Jon for strength, but he wasn’t there.

The ringing cries of a child pierced through the storm. The fog of pain cleared and she saw that it was Arya at her side, her hands gripped tightly to hers. She spoke, her voice a wondrous shock, but Daenerys could not hear the words. She only heard the wails of the child.

Khirri held it in such a way that she could not see, and Daenerys desperately called out, begging to
feel the newborn in her arms, fear filling her for every long moment that the babe was obscured from view.

Then the Dothraki woman turned, holding the child out to her with a happy smile on her face, and all the pain and fear was forgotten.

“A daughter,” Khirri said proudly, and a babe, the tiniest child, was placed securely in her arms. Daenerys marveled at the child’s warmth against her skin. A shock of dark hair lay wild upon her head.

Daenerys cradled her little one close, murmuring soothing whispers to the babe as she held her, marveling at each movement, each tiny breath. Her body ached and it hurt to move, but her heart was light and her mind was filled with joy.

She held a child of her own. A living child.

Chapter End Notes

apologies for the wait on this but I’ve been hellaciously ill for a couple weeks and nothing killed the writing spirit more than having to sit up for any length of time.

thanks for bearing with me, hope you enjoy. also, hello to all the new readers I've recently gotten. I see you. thanks for reading and leaving comments. I appreciate them all... even the profanity-laced one that called me a thirstbucket lol

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!