“I couldn’t love him back. Not the way he wanted. Not the way I love you.”

Her heart is as powerful and frantic as Drogon’s wings when he takes flight. She thinks the fear might consume her whole.

“Is that all right?” she asks softly. She nearly trembles.

And for a moment, the world is warm, small, safe. Jon has her in his arms, his body pouring into hers, his lips on her lips, his love a vast fire—and Dany, the Unburnt. She lets him burn her alive, delighting in the heat of his palms, the burn of his beard against her skin.

When it stops— when he pulls back—it’s sharper than ice.
devastates me.
The Siege

I.

When she stumbles back onto the ground, the breath knocked from her lungs and her heart closed tight like a fist in terror, it’s not her own life she’s thinking of.

She wants to be. She wants to fear the destruction of her, the crumbling of her life like a firebombed castle, the candle of potential snuffing out. She scrambles back on the bloody, ash-stained snow, her nails tearing desperately into the icy ground for leverage, her breaths coming out in a gasping, disjointed rhythm as the dead approach her. Not me, she wants to think. Not me.

Not her. The truth is a raw demon, ripping through Daenerys with such desperation and fear that it nearly leaves her incapacitated. Her arms jerk forward towards her stomach. She is whimpering, edging back, panicking, when she hears the whistle of a blade through the air, the sharp slice of a blow. The relief that flows through her feels like fire. And Jorah’s presence is the rebirth of life.

II.

Only death can pay for life.

Jorah’s body is wet from melted snow and blood and hot from her unrelenting clutch. She rocks him, her sobs tearing up her frame so forcefully it leaves her throat raw, despair chaining her in place. She doesn’t know how long she sits there rocking his corpse, Drogon curled sentry around her, the far-off sounds of hoots and cries and yelps a muffled backdrop to her pain. She can’t move. She can’t go. Only death can pay for life.

Jorah never knew. He’d never know. He’d never know that his death had protected more than just one life.

In the bloody snow— winter is coming, with fire and blood. Winter is coming. Winter is here. With fire and blood—alone, the world a dark nightmare, Dany kisses his mouth softly. And then she can only hold him tighter, drowning underneath all the words of gratitude she never said— and never would.

III.

She had almost forgotten.

It was a funny thing, that. For as long as she could remember, the Iron Throne had been a forefront to her thoughts. But in the first hours after the battle, she’s not thinking about the Throne, or Jon’s identity, or her reign.

She’s thinking about Ser Jorah. About Ser Barristan. Viserion.

Jon.

Her eyes flutter close with a rush of pain that shoots from her heart straight to her gut. She rests her hand there. In the silence. In the quiet. Her thumb brushes the fabric of her dress— still stiff with Ser Jorah’s dried blood, or perhaps her own. Or perhaps both. She knows she should change; clean-up is starting, and she is the Queen. She needs to be there, to stand with her people, no matter how unwelcoming they may be. No matter how much they dislike her.
The sickness in her stomach grows. Uneasiness twists around her heart like vines.

And her hand. It’s over Jorah’s blood. Over Jon’s child.

The thought makes her stomach roil, her eyes flutter nervously underneath her closed eyelids. Even whispering that in her own mind terrifies her, as if she’s cursed herself. The muscles in her hand twitch, spasm. And right as she’s lowering her hand, the door to her chambers clicks open.

“Your Grace?”

Dany’s never been more relieved to see anyone. Missandei stands tentatively in the doorway, her expression of deep concern easing into one of pleased relief at the sight of Dany, more or less intact. Grey Worm was the first person Dany saw at the end of it all; he’d stood stoically and somberly by her side until she had the strength to rise. He’d carried Ser Jorah’s body back, despite how his legs were trembling. Despite his exhaustion. Dany had slipped off to her chambers at once, shaky and craving respite from the chaos, the yelling. No doubt Grey Worm had told Missandei where to find her after reuniting.

“Come,” Dany beckons, her heart quickening with affection at the sight of Missandei’s clean, unblemished appearance. She was not harmed. That was the sweetest thing to happen since arriving in the North.

Missandei hurries over to Dany’s side, her usually calm demeanor a bit shaken in the trauma of the night. Missandei sits down beside Dany on the bed, her hands settling over Dany’s easily. Dany doesn’t notice that her own hands have settled back over her stomach until she feels Missandei’s join them.

There are few secrets between them. This is not one of them. Missandei—her most trusted friend. The first one to see her in the mornings, the last one to see her at night. The one with stories of peaceful places people could make home, stories that lift Dany up in times she feels the darkness in her own mind might swallow the whole world whole.

No. There are no secrets of this kind between them.

Missandei asks with her eyes. For the first time that night, Dany feels her eyes burn with tears, though she can’t let them break through. Not yet. Not when she must make an appearance. Must be strong. A queen.

“I don’t know,” Dany admits, and though she’s able to keep her tears at bay, there’s no stopping the way her words quake.

She thinks of how hard she fell off Drogon. She’d landed face-down. Maybe there wasn’t anything left to protect, after all.

“Who can I call?” Missandei asks. It takes Dany a moment to register that she’s spoken in High Valyrian.

It’s not unusual for the two of them to weave between languages when speaking, but something about this shift sends a chill over Dany. She can’t help but glance around the room, her heart jolting in fear. Has Missandei switched from the common tongue because she thinks someone is listening?

Dany answers her in Dothraki, her stomach churning with nausea once more. “No one. I don’t trust any healers here.”

Missandei’s brow furrows in gentle confusion. Dany has always felt belittled by others' doubt, but
somewhat, Missandei’s concerns have always done the opposite. When others question her, Dany feels threatened, unsure; when Missandei questions her, Dany feels loved. Missandei asks in order to know, to understand. To be close. Dany has never trusted anyone as she trusts her.

“But, Your Grace, I could fetch Zirva,” Missandei suggests softly, imploringly.

Dany looks at her. She’s not sure what Missandei sees reflected in her own eyes, what emotion is intermingled with the dancing of the firelight from the stuttering fire. But Missandei reads it all the same.

No more words are spoken. Not in any language. But Dany knows Missandei understands.

Here, in this disorienting landscape, where Dany can’t find her footing, she doesn’t trust anyone. Not even her own Dothraki healers.

“No one but you,” she hears herself say in Valyrian.

Missandei’s fingers curl tighter around Dany’s.

IV.

After the funeral pyre, she’s too worn down to hope for adoring love or worshiping words, but she expects a better reception than the one she receives. She gets a few coveted smiles from the Northerners, but it feels like an afterthought, like she’s a ghost only barely passing through their peripheral vision. I sacrificed so much for you, she wants to say. The words crawl up her throat. They’re thick and they’re choking. Jorah died because of you. I led him to his death. I watched half my people extinguish in the night. I could have lost Drogon. I could have lost her.

But it’s Jon’s distance that stings her the most. She could’ve stomached the Northerners’ cold ways if she had Jon by her side. But she can tell things are off balance from the moment they lock eyes after the battle. His hands open and close at his sides, almost as if he’d started to reach for her and thought better of it, and Dany feels a strange emotion brewing deep within her chest. Desperation, she realizes later.

It’s an off-putting feeling.

She wants nothing more than to fall into his embrace and kiss him, to tell him how thankful she is that he’s survived, to rejoice in their survival together. To tell him that she loves him; to give birth to the birds fluttering around her heart. To tell him what she’d gone down into that crypt to tell him before the battle. When everything had changed.

Rhaegar’s son. The intrusive words pop into Dany’s mind on a loop, and no matter how angrily she pushes the thought away, she catches herself looking across the hall at Jon all the same. Rhaegar’s son. Her brother, yes—but she had never met him. Never spoken with him. He was, to her, as powerful and faraway as a character in a storybook. Reconciling Jon, the man she loves, the man she’s been sharing her bed with nearly every night, with that presence is impossible. It doesn’t matter how many times her eyes rove over Jon’s strong jaw or his sleek hair, the words Rhaegar’s son, he’s Rhaegar’s son playing in her mind. She can’t see it. She can’t make it matter to her in the way she fears it may matter to Jon.

But it doesn’t matter the ways in which they think of it. She looks around that lonely hall during the celebration, bursting with people less lonely than her, and she knows they will see it. They will look at Jon and see a Targaryen. They will look at Jon and see Rhaegar’s son.

They will look at Jon and see a king. The rightful king.
Those crawling fears, those twisting suspicions. They had never been so loud as they were here in Winterfell. Being surrounded by uncertain glances and vaguely hostile indifference, watching Jon receive unadulterated love and admiration — the kind she always got— makes Dany feel frightened. Desperate.

Returning his small, hesitant smiles is challenging at best. Her sips of wine are tiny and purely for decorum; she feels like she may vomit at any moment. And when her hand starts to go towards her secret, she only barely manages to catch herself in time.

This was about more than the throne. But it was about that, too. Power, love, safety, home— it’s all one in the same. Does he know that?

It’s rising nausea that pushes her from the hall, down the corridors, back to her chambers. But it’s the pain in her heart that keeps her there.

V.

“I couldn’t love him back. Not the way he wanted. Not the way that I love you.”

Her heart is as powerful and frantic as Drogon’s wings when he takes flight. She thinks the fear might consume her whole.

“Is that all right?” she asks softly. She nearly trembles.

And for a moment, the world is warm, small, safe. Jon has her in his arms, his body pouring into hers, his lips on her lips, his love a vast fire— and Dany, the Unburnt. She lets him burn her alive, delighting in the heat of his palms, the burn of his beard against her skin.

When it stops— when he pulls back— it’s sharper than ice.

Dany feels the chill of it everywhere. She feels it in the leaden sinking of her heart. The sting behind her eyes. The prickling in her throat.

“I wish you’d never told me,” she admits. That feeling…desperation. It begins to churn and burn within her once more. Has she ever felt so frightened? Dany tries to think back, but she can’t think past her terror now, in this moment, as she realizes she’s on the brink of losing everything. Jon may not want to be with her anymore, and she’s going to have his child. If the truth gets out about his claim to the throne, she’ll be in immediate danger; she knows, without a doubt, that the people here in the North would do whatever they had to to get her out of the way if it meant getting Jon on the throne. She would end up hunted again, and if she survived to have this child, it would grow up as she had: cornered, stalked, without a true home.

And Jon, a voice inside her head whispers, though she doesn’t want it to. What if he decides he wants the throne after all? What if he orchestrates your downfall?

Looking at him now, his head bowed, the firelight puddling on his cheekbones…Dany can’t imagine him turning against her. Can’t imagine him taking everything from her.

But she can imagine his family doing it. She is no stranger to betrayal. She knows how to spot its path.

His family, she thinks bitterly. If it’s true that he’s who they say he is, I’m his family. We are.

Would that matter? If she tells him now…would he declare himself to her and their child, would he
forsake his past family, would he stay loyal to her and never betray her? Would he realize what she realized: that their only path to safety now is through each other?

“Tell no one,” she pleads, her desperation cresting like a wave.

She waits. She watches. She tells herself, if he can give her that promise, if he can secure their safety, she will trust him enough to tell him that the impossible has happened. A miracle.

He draws his lines in the sand very clearly. And without wanting to, without planning to, Dany does, too.

VI.

He attempts to muddy those lines as they discuss their plan for taking King’s Landing. He proclaims himself to her again, and again, and again. He stands up to his sisters. Dany wants it to mean something. She wants it to soothe her heart. But she’s been wounded, and she’s frightened, and she doesn’t have time. Every time they speak of playing the long-game, of starving the citizens out, all Dany can see is her own stomach swelling as those in King’s Landing become emaciated. When Sansa talks of waiting, of giving their armies time to recuperate, all Dany can see is the way Sansa will look at her once she starts showing. The danger she’ll be in here amongst wolves. Amongst enemies.

It’s the first time that word comes into play. Enemy. She’s tried so hard to take care of the North, to provide for them, to take care of them, but faced with their unrelenting hostility, she can’t help but recognize that, to them, she’ll never be more than a future enemy. All peace is tentative and ephemeral.

And once Jon tells Sansa, Arya, and Bran about his claim to the throne, nothing will be safe for her ever again.

So no, she can’t wait.

She can’t give her troops time to recover, because that’s giving Cersei time to prepare. That’s giving her body time to give away a secret that could be her downfall.

Later, back in her chambers, she asks Missandei if she thinks she’s doing the right thing. Missandei’s fingers are gentle in Dany’s hair, carefully unwinding the day’s braids in preparation for sleep.

“You’ll show soon,” Missandei answers in Valyrian.

It soothes Dany’s heart. It calms her resolve. Missandei is thinking the same thing. Missandei understands. If they both think so, they must be right.

“You’re Grace,” Missandei begins, a familiar shy, tentative tone to her voice. She softly rakes her fingers through Dany’s hair, removing the last twists of her braids. “Jon Snow…does he know?”

Dany’s throat narrows. She has to force herself to stay still as Missandei continues combing through her hair. She wants to flee the conversation. She wants to run from this. She has never imagined that something she's wanted so terribly, something she thought was impossible, could fill her with so much fear.

Somehow, this child is intrinsically tied to her fears of rejection. Rejection from Jon. Rejection from Westeros. Failure.

“No,” Dany answers. She won’t lie to Missandei. She reaches up and catches Missandei’s hand in
hers and holds it gently. “Only you,” she says again.

*You’re the only one I trust.*

“You don’t trust him?” Missandei asks softly.

It’s difficult to answer. Had Missandei asked her weeks ago, the answer would have been a resounding *yes, of course I trust him.* But she isn’t sure of anything here.

“Not with this. Not yet,” Dany answers finally.

Missandei doesn’t make her feel paranoid or mad for that. She doesn’t question it. She merely nods.

“Soon the war will be over,” Missandei says, “and it will be safe to tell him.”

For the first time in a while, Dany finds herself doubting that.

VII.

It’s funny: the sword disconnects Missandei’s head, but it’s *Dany* who feels disconnected from her body.

When Missandei’s body smacks the ground, Dany feels something very solid and very real inside her shatter. Her vision sways: it swims and blurs at the edges, jumps around, shivers. She can’t breathe for her pounding heart. And in her head, all she hears is *Dracarys!* intermingled with her own frantic heartbeats. She can’t hear a word anybody around her is saying. She doesn’t even know if they’re saying anything at all.

When she turns to walk away, it’s as if someone else is controlling her. She stumbles and sways.

And in her mind— hatred.

She doesn’t think about her. Or her. Or herself.

She thinks about fire and blood.

VIII.

No one comes to be with her. Nobody cares. That fact stops stinging after the first week and grows into a bitter fact she cannot ignore. One she feels the dull, pounding pain of every day.

She’s not even sure she’d want anybody to come, anyway. Tyrion offers no comfort; he seems frightened of her sorrow, unsure of it. A few Dothraki handmaidens try to speak with her, but when Dany looks at them, all she can see is Missandei’s head toppling from her body. And then she’s sick all over the stone floor.

She catches onto the poison quickly enough: her sense of smell has been heightened from the pregnancy, and she can tell something isn’t right from the first altered tray that’s brought to her. Not that it matters: she hasn’t eaten anything since before leaving for King’s Landing. She is certain she will never eat again.

And all day, everyday, there’s a building pressure within her chest, a grief so vast it feels to Dany to be the Great Grass Sea itself. She can’t speak to anyone. She doesn’t want to be with anyone. And yet, in the throes of it, she wants one specific one.

At night, she dreams of fire and blood, of screaming and destruction. She thinks of the ways she’s
going to destroy Cersei, the suffering she’ll make her endure for taking Missandei from her. *My only one*, Dany thinks, and then she’s sick again. She’s not even sure what she has left to purge.

When she looks at the sky, she sees emptiness where Rhaegal should be. When she curls on her bed, she doesn’t feel Missandei beside her. When she looks into the looking glass, she hardly recognizes herself.

The only thing in the world keeping her from charging right to King’s Landing and leveling it is *her*. The longer Dany goes without food, the more pronounced the slight swell to her stomach becomes. She can no longer ignore it, even if outsiders can’t yet see it. And she can’t help but feel like she still has something to protect, after all.

But Jon arrives, bringing with him emptiness. She gets no comfort from him. She gets no love. He stands at her side as she executes her most recent betrayer, but she feels his judgement. The chill of it radiates off him like cold from ice. Later, when they talk, she looks at him, and she searches his dark stranger’s eyes for the love she so desperately needs, the love she hoped he might bring. She realizes all at once that there is nothing here for her. Nothing but ashes, fire and blood. He can’t even stand to kiss her; how could he stand to raise a child with her? He isn’t loyal enough to her to keep a secret; how can she trust him with this one?

How can she trust anyone?

How can she bear this?

How can she breathe, or speak, or lead when her heart is nothing but a Red Waste?

She has been alone in the world many, many times. But she has never felt as alone as she feels then. She struggles to find faith in herself the way she used to…but she can’t shake the suspicion that she has led herself and her child to their ruin.

The only thing to do now is to conquer this threat. She *has* to remove Cersei from power. She *has* to reclaim her rightful throne with undeniable power and might, the sort that won’t allow room for uprisings or usurpers.

She may not have Jon’s love. Or anyone’s.

But she will love her child. And she will make the world safe for her. No matter what it takes. No matter the cost.

The cost will be great.

IX.

The night before their siege, she is faint with hunger. No matter how hard she tries, she can’t keep from stumbling from vertigo as she walks from the war room.

Her heart stills in her chest when it’s Jon’s hand that steadies her.

“Dany—”

She pulls from his touch and walks away before he can say anything else. She doesn’t want to hear it. Doesn’t want to be called that. Doesn’t want to look into his eyes. Doesn’t even want his hand on her. Not like that.

She retreats to her chambers, and it’s there that she feels tears begin to rise. Her hands shake. She
stopped feeling hunger gnawing at her insides days ago, but she’s tired and weak, and she can’t seem
to control her outbursts. She wants to scream until her throat is bloody. She wants to destroy
everything she touches. She wants to cry, and cry, and cry, and never stop.

She wants Missandei back. She wants Ser Jorah. She wants Ser Barristan, Irri, Drogo.

Jon.

It’s then that she cries. It’s a flood from deep within her; once it starts, she can’t stop it. She weeps
until she can’t anymore, and then a familiar emptiness falls over her. She sits on the edge of the bed
and imagines Missandei walking through the door. She nearly gets sick from the pain of it. And
when she hears a knock to her door, she thinks perhaps she’s become mad after all.

“Dany?”

She is certain that if she were able to feel anything, she’d feel surprised at him seeking her out again
after their disastrous last meeting alone. She is wary as he steps into the room. She eyes the tray in his
hands.

“You need to eat, Dany,” he tells her.

She wants to ask him why he’s so insistent on calling her Dany, Dany, Dany. What’s he trying to
say? What’s he trying to prove? If she’s his queen and his queen only, shouldn’t it be ‘Your Grace’?
She’s too tired to press it. But she won’t take the meal. He sits carefully beside her— she notices he
leaves space between their bodies— and holds the tray up imploringly.

Her words come out of their own accord, sharp and severe. “I won’t eat that.”

Jon seems to struggle with what to say back to that. He lowers the tray to his lap. She can feel his
troubled glance.

“Why not? How are you meant to lead us to victory if you can’t even stand for longer than a couple
minutes?”

She looks to the side, as far away from his eyes as she can. She’s afraid to look at him and see that
stranger again.

“Varys was poisoning my food the entire time I was here,” she admits coldly. She hadn’t told Jon the
depth of Varys’s betrayal yet; she felt he should’ve sought to understand if he didn’t, rather than look
at her with those eyes she could not bear.

She can tell he’s not sure whether or not to believe her. She isn’t going to waste energy defending
facts.

“Varys is gone,” Jon finally says. “I’ve brought you the tray.”

When she doesn’t look at him or say a word in response, it dawns on him. Dany can almost feel his
horror.

“You don’t trust me,” he realizes. “Dany— I wouldn’t— you’re my queen, how could you think I’d
ever—”

“I don’t think. I know. I know betrayal, Jon. I’ve been betrayed more times than I can count. I know
you’re going to betray me. You already have. I won’t make it easier for you. I won’t make it easy for
anybody.”

He’s beginning to sound angry. “I’ve stood by you this whole time—”

“And what do I have to show for that?” Dany snaps. She hides her trembling hands beneath her thighs. “One-third the soldiers I came to the North with? One dragon? A country rallying behind you rather than me? All my trusted friends killed? Rejection?”

Of all those things, the last stings her the most to speak of. She knows it’s because it’s the only secret admission of all three. The only pain that’s been allowed to live in secret as the rest happened for the world to see.

Her eyes are burning again. It matches the rage burning bright in her heart. For a moment, she fears she’ll burst into flames.

“It’s not my fault,” she says suddenly, her words sharp and pained. “It’s not my fault you’re Rhaegar’s son. I didn’t know any more than you did.”

“I know that, Dany,” Jon says tiredly. “And I don’t—”

“You don’t want it. I’ve already told you: it doesn’t matter. Varys has already seen to it that you’ll get it anyway,” she says bitterly. “But it’s not about that, Jon. You look at me like I’m…like I’ve tricked you, like I’ve turned into something different in front of your eyes. But I haven’t. I’m the same woman I was before. You say you love me, Jon, but I don’t feel that from you. All I feel is disgust. I have nothing.”

For the first time, she truly believes that. She can’t imagine a safe, happy future for herself or for her (their) child. She can’t picture a home. Wasn’t that what King’s Landing was meant to be? Home?

She hasn’t felt at home once since she and Jon stepped off that boat. Right then, she is certain she never will again. She will die an immigrant, displaced from all comfort. From all love. Betrayal will be the dagger. That much she knows.

Jon can’t seem to come up with anything to say. That should make Dany feel worse, but she’s just exhausted.

“You can go now,” she tells him flatly. She has no choice but to recline back onto the bed due to her spinning head. The smell of the food Jon brought makes her feel sicker than before. She turns over onto her side and waits for his departing footsteps.

“I didn’t know what to say,” Jon finally says, his voice soft. “I still don’t know what to say. Dany, I never meant…all the things you gave up for me, for your people. I feel responsible.”

His guilt hurts worse than his indifference. Indifference means he doesn’t love her; guilt means he feels sorry for her, and pity is perhaps the most sickening emotion of all.

“There is no love in pity,” she says, her eyes still closed, still curled on her side. “Only duty.”

That seems to pull him up short for a moment. Finally, he says: “But I do love you. This is all so strange to me. I need time to adjust. I need time to figure out what this means, what we mean. What I mean.”

“I’m out of time, Jon,” she says, her voice empty. “I will take what’s mine. And I’ll do whatever I have to to take it. I don’t have any other choice now.”
She nearly jumps out of her skin when his hand settles on her hip. He keeps it there, a heavy weight like an anchor, and Dany knows she should tell him to go away, to not touch her, but all she’s wanted since she lost Jorah, and absolutely since she lost Missandei, is to be comforted. Loved. This could almost feel like that. Almost. If she closes her eyes tightly enough. If she pretends hard enough.

But she knows Jon can’t give her what she needs. A realization has never felt more like a funeral march.

“How do you think that?” Jon challenges. “We can stay here a bit longer, plan our attack more thoroughly. Look for a better solution. I know you’re angry. You have every right to be. But you’re not well, Dany”—as he speaks, his hand caresses slightly over her hip. It makes something inside Dany snap again. She sits up and spins to look at him, flames licking in her glare, heat radiating off her scowl.

“Do not presume to know what I am or am not any longer. If I am merely ‘Your Grace’ to you, speak as such. Do as such. I’m tired.”

She thinks to herself that she gave and gave and gave only to see no whisper of return. She feels as if she’s wrung the blood from her own heart just to be given a cup full of dust.

Jon’s dark brow furrows slightly. “Your Grace,” he begins again, though it is slightly dry, “Cersei is expecting us. She’s expecting you to do exactly what you’re going to do. We could wait here, form a different plan, take her off guard—”

“I’m through with other’s plans. They have earned me nothing, achieved nothing. And I won’t be waiting any longer. I can’t.”

She feels he is so out of tune with her these days (such a far cry from the man he’d been with her on that boat) that she doesn’t think a thing of letting her hand rest on her slightly-swollen stomach. She stares unseeingly at the bedspread as her eyes fill with tears, thinking on a loop I will never feel Missandei’s hand on mine again. I will never feel Missandei’s hand on mine again. I will never feel Missandei’s hand ever again.

When she feels the bed shift, she assumes he’s finally stood to leave her be. But she feels the heat from his body draw closer. She squeezes her eyes shut, her heart picking up pace, waiting. Waiting. Would she always be waiting?

“Dan— Your Grace…—?”

His question is cut off by the sound of her door pushing open. There is only one person close enough to her now to enter her chambers without announcing themselves, and that is Grey Worm. Dany reluctantly sits up, her hand slipping from her stomach and into her lap, her eyes on Grey Worm.

“Yes?” she asks him. Her voice sounds dead to her own ears.

He hasn’t said a word yet and doesn’t appear stressed, but Dany is. She feels shaky, and her heart is pounding. Because she can feel Jon’s eyes chained at the level of her waist. His gaze is impossibly heavy.

“Tyrion asks after you, Your Grace,” Grey Worm says in Valyrian. His eyes flash once to Jon and then back to Dany. “Do you need assistance?”

She knows what he is asking. Grey Worm doesn’t trust Jon Snow. Dany wishes she was so certain of her own distrust.
“No. Take me to Tyrion,” she requests, rising to her feet. She has to tighten her core to keep from swaying as she grows lightheaded once more.

As she steps forward, she feels Jon’s fingertips graze the back of her hand as he reaches out for her questioningly.

She keeps walking.

X.

Without the Iron Fleet, the Scorpions, and the front gate, King’s Landing folds like damp paper beneath her.

She and Drogon look down from above, ash-smereed and out of breath, the destruction below them signifying total surrender and defeat. It had been easy. It had been too easy.

The plan as outlined before she’d taken to the sky with Drogon had been for her to burn the ships, take down the gate so her soldiers could enter, and wait for surrender. Upon surrender, Tyrion had told her Cersei would be arrested, tried, and executed, and then her reign could begin.

But how could that be so? She doesn’t feel any different at all. She thought she’d feel comforted, vindicated. Relieved. But she has the same dark anger furling around her heart now as she did before she took flight. All around her the bells sound, but Dany can’t understand: if it’s over, why doesn’t she feel any better?

Distrust crawls up and down her spine like a many-legged insect. Her brain is churning with fears and suspicions. How could she have won already? After all the years, all the preparation— how could it be that she hears the bells of surrender already?

The noise is boisterous, bragging almost. She can’t stand it. She feels Drogon tremble impatiently beneath her, no doubt wanting to take flight, to keep on. To destroy more— punish more. Is that what she wants, too?

Agony takes root inside of her. She doesn’t know what she wants, what she needs. She only knows one thing: she wants Cersei to suffer. She wants her to die in pain, afraid, alone. She thinks only that can save her.

She had listened to Tyrion’s ideas every time and all they had brought her was misery and loss. She’s done listening. She can’t listen to anyone anymore. Surrendering is a luxury she doesn’t feel Cersei deserves; a quick execution by fire too soft a sentence.

So she leans forward, tightening her thighs around Drogon once more to hang on tight as he shoots forward again. From up so high, nothing below her looks real. She can’t make out faces or get any clear idea of what her people think about all of this. If they are grateful.

What if they aren’t? What if, after all of this, after saving them from the Night King and liberating them from Lannister chains, they still hate her?

*Let it be fear,* she’d said to Jon. And her heart rate picks up even more as she realizes that may be all she ever finds here. It had once felt powerful to be feared. Now it just feels sad.

The bell ringing seems to become more incessant. Drogon swoops lower, skimming over roofs, bold now that the Scorpions are gone. And Dany’s only got eyes for one thing: the Red Keep.

She’s not thinking about anything but making Cersei suffer. She’s not thinking of anything but
destroying her once and for all. So when Drogon slows abruptly and suddenly veers low, it almost
seems to pull her from a trance. Her rage is so great she feels scattered, frantic: her thoughts are
disjointed and jumping across her mind. She registers things in panicked bursts: Drogon, lowering

She realizes Drogon is taking them to Jon. She is so surprised by this decision that she doesn’t order
him back up. She realizes as they draw nearer that he’s running towards the Red Keep. Her heart
stutters in her chest and stops for a moment. What is he doing? Is he trying to remove Cersei before
she can destroy her? Has his betrayal started already?

But it clicks all at once. He and his Northern soldiers are evacuating Cersei’s civilian shield from the
Red Keep, yanking them kicking and screaming into the streets. No doubt the people being removed
think they’re about to be killed.

Dany watches Jon pull violently on person after person, shoving them from the Red Keep so quickly
that half of them fall onto the stone streets. Drogon begins to rise again. Dany watches in horror from
a higher angle as Jon removes a young mother and her infant, and soon, Dany realizes the streets
around them are littered with children. Cersei has packed her shield with innocents.

That only stirs her rage once more. She leans forward on Drogon, her teeth gritting, and she nearly
takes off towards the Keep right then. But she can hear the faint sound of babies wailing, and
mothers screaming, and it gives her pause just long enough to glance back down.

She meets Jon’s eyes. She can’t make out his expression, but she sees his resolute nod. She
understands that he understands. That he’s supporting her. Even if it’s only as his queen.

Drogon bears down on the Red Keep. Dany has never seen him fly so fast; she has to close her eyes
against the beating wind. When he stops at Cersei’s resting place, Dany feels her rage bubble up in
her throat. It comes out as one word: Missandei’s last.

“Dracarys!”

The Red Keep catches flame beautifully. Though it’s already gone up in flames, Drogon keeps on,
spurred by the same rage Dany can feel coursing through her own veins. He bathes the Red Keep in
fire and blood, and as long as he’s breathing fire, Dany’s screaming. Let her die trapped, terrified,
the flames chasing her down the crumbling corridors. Let it be fear.

When she runs out of air and stops screaming, Drogon’s flames stop. The heat from the raging
inferno licks hotly at them both, but Dany relishes in it. For a mad moment, she wants to fly lower
and stick her toes in the flames. To bask in Cersei’s pain and suffering. Dracarys.

She’s planning on circling above the Red Keep as long as it takes to watch the entire thing burn to
the ground. But a sudden noise— so powerful the force of it flattens her to Drogon’s back— catches
her off guard. Dany rears her head in the direction of the sound, disoriented and confused. She can
no longer hear the bells. After the first boom!, another follows, this time closer and so loud Dany can
feel it echoing in her bones.

She doesn’t understand at first. Bright bursts of green light and flame flare up in giant clouds, one
after the other, seemingly in a line. Screams of pain and terror intermingle with the sound of raining
debris. From high above, she sees a child blown to pieces in front of her mother, the green explosion
soon taking her, too.

She instinctively flies lower as if she can make better sense of what’s happening if she’s closer to it.
As she draws nearer to the chaos, she can make out one word from the soldiers below, panicked and
“WILDFIRE!”

“IT’S WILDFIRE!”

“RUN!”

She and Drogon fly lower, and without thinking, she tries to land him to pull people onto his back, to rescue them from the green, burning sea. But people shriek and run from her, eaten alive by terror, and soon, eaten alive by flames. She spots a mother sprinting, her newborn clutched to her chest. The mother’s eye is blown from her socket. Dany urges Drogon faster, lower, faster, lower, her hand rising off his back, reaching out—

A flash of green. Severe agony. Then blackness.

XI.

Dany can hear before she can move or speak.

“There. The ointment’s set. Leave it be for the next six hours; do not disturb the wound.”

“Yes, Maester.”

“Is she healing?” Tyrion.

“Yes, I believe there are some improvements.” There is a pause. “Did Her Grace…” The Maester stops.

“What? Did she what?”

“Did she tell you that—”

“You may take your leave now, Maester,” another voice interrupts. Jon.

Dany’s fingertips twitch slightly. She focuses all her thought on her fingers and struggles to make them move more than that, but her hand feels disconnected from her mind. She soon gives up: the agony that takes root in her body makes her unaware of anything else.

“What was he going to say?” Tyrion asks.

“I imagine if there was something Her Grace wanted you to know, she would have told you,” Jon answers, and Dany feels a strange lurch in her heart as he does. “Do you think she’ll wake?”

“Yes,” Tyrion says definitively. “Soon, I expect. And we must have answers when she does.”

“We have answers. They just aren’t particularly good ones.”

“Do we tell her about the Wildfire?”

“What choice do we have? She’ll see the destruction.”

“Do we tell her the people think it was her?”

“She’ll find that out soon enough, too.” A pause. “Considering what your sister has done with Wildfire before, it shouldn’t be work to explain to the people that she set it off again.”
“But she didn’t set it off. Daenerys did.”

“She didn’t know,” Jon defends.

“She wasn’t supposed to burn the Red Keep at all. Had she followed the plan, Cersei’s trap never would’ve worked.”

Jon doesn’t respond to that. Dany wonders vaguely, the thought hazy behind the pain, if he blames her. She wants to ask them how many people have died. But she thinks she already knows.

“What shall we tell the people?”

“We tell them that their queen is recovering. That she fell into Cersei’s trap. That she will soon be on the Iron Throne where she belongs,” Jon answers.

Sometime while Dany was inside that empty twilight of unconsciousness, she’d gotten her crown.

She wonders why she doesn’t feel happy. All she can feel is agony and deep terror. Her hand twitches again, and this time, she’s able to move it slightly. She tries to move it to her stomach, but she can’t get her body to obey. *My children*, she thinks. Her eyes burn. Drogon. Her baby. She doesn’t care about the Throne, which must be a deformed, melted mess by now. She needs to know what it had cost her.

Jon must’ve seen her movement: she feels his hand, dirt-caked and calloused, settle over hers. Her heart beats fast.

“Dany?” he asks.

She can feel tears leaking from the corners of her closed eyes. They tickle as they trail down her face, no doubt cutting a path through the soot and blood she can feel congealed to her skin. The sobs building in her chest are trapped: she can’t open her mouth to let them free. Her diaphragm spasms as she struggles to give voice to her agony, her despair. Because with the way her entire body aches, she’s certain she’s lost everything. She hadn’t even known there was more to lose.

“She must be in pain. I’ll send for the Maester once more; he can give her more milk of the poppy,” Tyrion says tiredly.

Dany hears his departing footsteps. Her choked gasping gets worse. Pain explodes over her body as Jon suddenly grasps her shoulders and lifts her up as if he fears she’s choking.

“Dany?” he sounds panicked now. His fear—*let it be fear*—pushes something into place inside her mind, and her lips part. Her first sob is hardly more than a pained wheeze, but soon, she’s bawling.

She wants to stop. She wants to remember who she is: Daenerys Stormborn of House Targaryen, the First of Her Name, Queen of the Andals and the First Men, Protector of the Seven Kingdoms, the Mother of Dragons—

Is she even a mother anymore? Has she lost Drogon, the only thing left? And has she lost the miracle she’d yet to meet?

Jon still doesn’t know what to say: that’s clear in his stunned, worried silence. But unlike before, he makes up for that with action. He joins her on the bed, his arms wrapping around her, and he holds her to his chest as she weeps. She had started crying out of fear of what might have happened to her dragon, her unborn child, her kingdom, but once she starts, she cannot stop. She cries for Ser Jorah, for Missandei, for the Dothraki and Unsullied she led to their deaths. She cries for the people she saw
explode into green flames. She cries for herself.

All this way, all this time, and right then, she’s certain she doesn’t even want the Throne. That only makes her cry harder. Without the Throne, who is she? Who is she?

Jon finds words some time later, when her hysterical sobs have pandered off into emptiness. They’re just not the words she’s expecting.

“Why didn’t you tell me, Dany?”

It’s an absurd question. She can’t find it in her to answer him. But she doesn’t try to move away from him, either.

“The Maester knows now. He nearly told Tyrion. How long have you known?”

She’s certain she could speak if she wanted to now, but she doesn’t want to. As soon as she gives him the answers he seeks, he’ll let go of her, and he’ll leave. He’ll leave her alone. He’s all she has. The only thing in the world. And she’s afraid.

“What were you going to do? Keep it a secret until you couldn’t anymore?” he demands.

She hasn’t planned on responding, but the words slip out anyway. “I imagined you’d betray me long before that point.”

He lets out a growl of frustration. “I’ve told you: I don’t want the Throne! What more do I have to say?!”

“You don’t want the Throne. And you don’t want me.”

“That’s not—”

“Yes it is. I lost you the moment you found out who you are. And now our child will be a fatherless bastard.”

It was as if she’d slapped him. He flinched.

“If our child is even still here,” she adds, her voice drenched in pain she cannot hide. Her eyes burn again.

They’re both quiet for a couple heavy minutes. Dany can tell Jon is considering leaving. She knows there’s nothing she can do to stop it if he does.

“The Maester seems to think you’re still with child,” Jon finally tells her. “You didn’t fall. The explosion sent debris down onto your head and onto Drogon’s back—”

“Drogon—”

“He’s okay. I don’t know where he is, though. He carried you to me. When we got you off him, he took off, and no one’s seen him since.”

Dany’s heart sears with pain. She can’t bear the thought of Drogon somewhere alone, injured. Without his brothers. Without his mother.

“Do you know what happened?” Jon asks her.

She’d heard enough to understand, but she shakes her head anyway. Selfishly, she knows the longer
he talks, the longer he’ll stay. So she stays there in his half-unsure embrace and listens to him explain what happened. Cersei’s planted trial of wildfire caches, strategically placed so that any attack on the Red Keep would also practically level King’s Landing. He explains that the surviving citizens, who were already traumatized and shell-shocked from the battle itself, had seen her set fire to the Red Keep, and then suddenly, everywhere was burning. They blame her. He doesn’t say it, but she knows it: they hate her. It doesn’t matter if she proves she didn’t set off the Wildfire on purpose; she’d set it off. They’d seen it. She’d killed them. And she would never rule anything more than a graveyard.

“We can explain it to them,” Jon tells her.

“It won’t matter.”

“Of course it will matter. You didn’t do it on purpose.”

“But I did it. I attacked the Red Keep. And it felt good.” She is able to lean back slightly. She looks up at him, her stomach sick. “It felt so good, Jon.”

“It’s over now,” he tells her reflexively. As if that can erase it all.

“No,” Dany says. She’s weary, exhausted. “It’s only just begun.”

She doesn’t want to talk anymore. She lays her arm over her stomach and finds herself thinking that she would hand the throne over to Jon right then just to feel her child stir inside of her. Just to see Drogon again.

She’s not sure who it is that woke up.
The Wheel

Chapter Notes

Thank you to all who are reading, leaving kudos, and commenting-- it helps to know other people are as frustrated by this season as I am!

I.

The opened window of her chambers becomes her entire world.

Tyrion flits in and out without cessation now that she’s awake, asking her question after question so that he may rule in her absence, but Daenerys pays him little mind. She cares little for the type of mortar they might import to repair roads and buildings: she’s too busy studying the sky.

One day, she knows she’ll see Drogon’s dark shadow, his graceful glide slicing through the clouds. She thinks she may just wait in her sickbed ’til then.

It won’t be a long wait at all if she doesn’t start eating, the Maester warns her. Her sickbed may become her deathbed, he adds. It just doesn’t affect her like a warning should. She is so detached, so empty, that dying doesn’t seem like such a monumental thing. Sometimes, she already feels dead.

She could never tell anyone: they would declare her mad, slit her throat in her sleep, dispose of her in disturbed secret. But she has begun talking to the gods— all of them, any of them— and making pacts. If you return Missandei to me, I’ll eat. If you return Ser Jorah to me, I’ll get up from this bed. If you return my children to me, I’ll take the Maester’s medicines.

As if the gods care about her. As if they care about her life. Her bartering hinges on that, so she knows it’s useless. Still— it’s all she can do. That and watch the sky.

Jon visits sporadically. More often than not, they sit in silence. Sometimes he sets his hand on hers, but he never entwines their fingers. Sometimes he talks to her, but sometimes she doesn’t talk back. She resents his distance. She resents him. She wishes she’d never given him reason to let onto her pregnancy: she knows he’s at her side now out of duty, out of pity. Not out of love. And that’s worse than being hated.

“Why won’t she take her meal?” Tyrion demands. He’s standing right outside her chambers; Dany thinks he’s an idiot for thinking she can’t hear him.

“She’s got a sickness of the mind and heart, Lord Tyrion,” the Maester answers. “I fear she’s seeing demons in everyone. Like her father.”

“Is that your honorable judgement as a learned Maester?” Tyrion challenges, his voice sharp. “Or a treasonous whisper?”

“My honorable judgement, my lord. She fears the food is poisoned.”

“And it was previously. But that threat has been since dealt with,” Tyrion mutters. “The people grow restless. Jon Snow, along with advisors from the North, have been speaking with the surviving citizens and repairing our queen’s reputation. But the longer she remains a mystery— the longer they
only have their memories of her destroying King’s Landing to go by— the worse things will become. I need her up, Maester.”

“Then I suggest you find a more skillful Maester than myself, Lord Tyrion. I can do nothing for someone with no will to live.”

“She’s got everything she’s been fighting for! Why would she have no will to live?!” Tyrion explodes, his frustration audible in his words.

“Perhaps she’s found that what she wanted wasn’t what she needed.”

Dany turns her face to the side. She closes her eyes. Outside her window, she hears a dog howl. The air rings with emptiness.

II.

The Maester takes an aggressive approach after that.

“Dead in two weeks. Is that the reign you meant to have?”

Dany’s eyes trace over a cloud that reminds her of the bells in Drogo’s braid. If she closes her eyes, she can almost hear the soft tinkling of them. Can almost smell the spiced oils in his hair. She thinks, if she could go back to being a Khaleesi, she might find the Maester’s words chilling. But here in the west, she can’t feel anything anymore.

“A queen whose only achievement is destroying King’s Landing. Is that your intention?”

Then again, the cloud almost reminds her of a cluster of berries, the sort she’d see crop up amongst brushes of weeds in Meereen. For a time, she imagines she can feel the Essos sun on her skin. For a moment, she hears a faraway whisper of mhysa.

“A mother who starves her unborn child to death inside of her. Is that what you want?”

Her eyes snap from the window to the Maester. Her knees twitch beneath the covers, as if her legs have a mind to rise even if she doesn’t. Rage boils in her throat. Her fury could be flames when she finally speaks.

“The next time you address me that way will be the last time you address anybody,” she hisses.

Tyrion may have him under pressure to heal her, but she is the one who could burn him. It’s then that she realizes she’s lost their fear, too. The fury in the look she shoots him only seems to shake him a little. Without Drogon, thin and weak in her sickbed, she imagines she’s no more frightening than a little girl.

“No one is plotting against you, Your Grace,” the Maester tells her again. “What are you waiting for?”

For betrayal. For a god, any god, to return Missandei to her. For her heart to unfurl and open once more. For someone to know her, to love her. For the blessing of being surrounded by advisors she trusts, advisors she knows won’t poison her and her baby.

She’s not entirely suicidal: she has a plan. Once Drogon comes back for her— once he swoops down low in front of her perpetually-opened window— she’ll climb onto his back. She and her child will leave. Perhaps she’ll come back to rule once she’s recovered, once she’s strong again. Once she can protect herself and her child. Perhaps she won’t.
“Well, whatever it is,” the Maester finally says, after a long pause. “You won’t find it in death.”

III.

Jon stands quietly in the doorway with a tray. Dany turns from him and looks back towards the sky.

“How are you feeling?” Jon asks.

She hears the door shut behind him. It gives her reason to glance his way; he’s left the door slightly ajar the past few times he’s seen her, as if he fears being alone with her. He meets her eyes now as he carries the tray of food over to her. He sits on the bed.

“What?” she asks warily, flatly. He hasn’t brought her food once since her injury; she guesses Tyrion is truly desperate to have convinced Jon to help.

“There’s talk of a dragon flying nearby,” Jon says. He sets the tray on the bed beside him. Dany watches him smear spiced honey on a fresh roll. He says nothing as he bites into it and chews.

Dany’s heart struggles to take flight inside her ribs at the mention of her son.

“When?” Dany asks.

“There, they said,” Jon answers. He takes another bite of the roll. Dany’s wondering why he’s taken his meal to her chambers to consume when he suddenly holds the bread out to her, teethmarks still evident, half of it consumed. It doesn’t take long for Dany to understand. She stares at the roll, at him. At his eyes. For a brief moment, she feels a thrill of familiarity shoot through her at the lovely darkness of home. It leaves her shaken. She looks away from him, towards the window, but her heart is pounding and her face feels hot.

“It could be slow-acting,” she says quietly, her own words sounding far away.

“It could. That’s why I ate from the same batch this morning. And last time I checked, I’m not the one on death’s door.”

She doesn’t respond. She can’t look back at his eyes. She’s suddenly afraid she’ll slip back onto the boat with him the next time they share a glance, back into the heat of his body on hers, the warmth of his gasps against her lips. She’s afraid to feel something when for so long she’s felt nothing.

“Dany.”

She doesn’t look at him. His hand settles over hers. A second later, his fingers push between hers, entwining. She catches herself gripping back.

“Daenerys,” he says again.

Her gaze dances over to him, uncertain. Afraid. Is fear all she can give him?

His eyes drill into hers with an intensity she hasn’t expected. Like she feared, her mind flashes back: there’s the rocking of a boat on waves, the creaking of the deck above them, the heat of the fire. And Jon. Meeting his eyes now is like sinking into the past. She can feel his nose brushing against her cheek, his fingers silken against her skin, his muscles shifting beneath her palms. She wants to look away, to wince, but she can’t.

“I would never let someone poison you.”

You let Varys, she wants to say. I let Varys. I’ll never make myself vulnerable like that again. I would
rather die by my own will here in this bed than let someone betray me ever again. Than let someone hurt me ever again. Than let you hurt me again.

Instead, she breaths with him, their inhalations somehow synced. She’s not sure if he’s moved closer, but his breath is warm on her face, and she can’t remember that being the case moments prior.


She waits for him to tell her she’s mad, irrational, paranoid, crazed. That’s what everyone else has been telling her— even if only in quick, judgmental glances or cryptic comments. But he doesn’t. She tastes his breath on her lips. His face is hovering above hers now, a cloud in the sky. A glimpse towards freedom.

“Your people need you, Your Grace,” he says. His closeness makes her head spin with seasickness. She tells herself that must be what it is. “They need you to be you. Daenerys Stormborn of House Targaryen. The Mother of Dragons. The Breaker of Chains. The Ruler of the Realm.” She watches his eyes drift down from hers. They take in her lips for a couple of seconds— a guilty devouring, a coveted glance. She’s hardly breathing. Her head is light. “Our child needs you.” There’s a pause that nearly crushes the breath from her lungs. He meets her eyes again, and when he does, she feels a thousand chills dance down her spine. “Dany, I need you.”

She’s consumed by the heat of his gaze. In that moment, she believes him. She sees in him what she saw before the truth of who he was ripped them apart. She sees Jon.

And for the first time since she’d regained consciousness, for the first time since she’d won her crown but found it didn’t quite fit her head, she feels like Daenerys.

IV.

The first place she goes once she’s up and walking is to the balcony to survey what she’s won.

Grey Worm stands with her. He’s quiet, but he’s standing close enough that their arms press together. Dany knows he’s still worried for her.

“It’s terrible,” she comments. She can’t seem to process the sheer destruction. It doesn’t look like damage from fire; it looks to her as if the gods themselves stepped down from the skies and trampled everything underfoot.

“It was worse,” Grey Worm admits. “They are working fast to repair. Everyone. Unsullied, Dothraki, the Northern soldiers, the people. Lord Baratheon sent men from Storm’s End to aid us and so have other allies.”

Her throat closes and her eyes sting before she even realizes how much those words mean to her. She looks to the side, away from Grey Worm, not wanting her tears to add another layer of weakness to her. She knows her biggest battle now will be regaining strength in everyone’s eyes. She sometimes feels she’s starting back from nothing.

“Are the people as well as they can be? Tyrion assured me they are being fed and housed and nursed.” But I don’t trust him as well as I do you. She doesn’t even need to say it. Grey Worm knows, just as Missandei always did.

“Yes. They are eating better than they ate before, they tell me. But they don’t know what to make of you.”
Dany can’t blame them. Their only interaction with her had been during the most traumatic event of their lives.

“Once I’m stronger, I’ll speak to them. Once I’m healed,” Dany says. But she’s afraid again. What if that never comes to pass?

Grey Worm inches a bit closer. Her shoulder presses against his arm.

“You are already strong,” he tells her in his native tongue, his eyes cast over the rebuilding beneath them, the damaged kingdom they’d won.

Oh, she feels so far from it, but he makes her believe it for a moment. He makes her stand taller, feel braver. Feel more like herself. She had stood so vulnerably here beside him, and he had built her up, not torn her down. She repays trust with trust.

“I’m with child,” she tells him in Valyrian. She watches a group of men—a combination of Unsullied, Dothraki, Northerners, and smallfolk—pound a beam into the ground from far below. They looked to be rebuilding a home. “Only Jon and the Maester know. I fear others knowing.”

She sees his surprised look from the corner of her eye. It makes her heart sting for a moment because it’s proof that Missandei never told him. Further proof that she never betrayed Dany’s trust. Her love.

“Do not fear,” Grey Worm finally tells her, his voice more commanding than she had ever heard. “You are Queen Daenerys. The only thing your child will know is love and safety.”

It is a promise to her and a threat to everyone else.

Dany leans her head against his arm softly.

They say nothing else.

Dany can feel Missandei near her when she closes her eyes.

V.

She winces as her fingers pull through her silver hair.

She leans closer to the looking glass and tenderly parts her hair, peering carefully at the wound just above her right temple. She knows it was much worse all that time she was in her sickbed, the smell of willow ointment festering in her nostrils, but even now it makes her stomach clench. It’s deep, jagged: the closing ointment has congealed her blood as intended so that it’s no longer gaping, but it still sends pain shooting all the way down to her arm when she moves her eyebrows in a certain way.

“It looks better,” Jon says.

Dany looks into the mirror and meets the reflection of his eyes. His boots echo throughout her chambers as he crosses over to her. He stops just behind her—not close enough that he’s against her back, but not far enough that she can’t feel his body heat.

“Does it?” Dany asks lightly. A ghost of a smile graces her lips. “That’s a frightening thought.”

A hint of a smile plays at the corners of his mouth. Dany drops her eyes in hopes of hiding the way her heart jumps at the sight of it. Her fingers pull nervously at the curling ends of her molten hair.
“Tyrion tells me you want to pay the Lannister soldiers a visit,” he states suddenly.

Dany nods firmly. It was why she’s attempting to braid her hair. It’s been loose since she woke.

“I’m sure he told you with as much displeasure as he showed when he received the news from me,” Dany says.

“I believe when he asked you what to do about the prisoners, he was thinking more in line with a trial than a visit,” Jon agrees.

Dany begins slowly parting her hair, wincing all the while. She knows braiding isn’t going to be easy, but she thinks she might feel stronger if she manages it. And she’ll need her strength.

“If there’s to be a trial or an execution, it will be by my hand and my lead. And before there’s a trial, I will set eyes on them and see who they are.”

She thinks she sees respect shining in his eyes when she looks back at him. Her hands nearly slip from her braid, but she’s able to keep her fingers in place as she continues weaving sections of her hair. She has her braid halfway completed when she loses grip on one section of her hair, causing most of the braid to unwind. She twists her lips in displeasure.

“I’ve never seen you braid your hair before,” Jon says suddenly. His ghost-smile is back. “It’s always just fixed by the next morning. The process isn’t quite as magical as I’d imagined.”

Dany smiles, but it’s sad, and her heart aches.

“Missandei always did it. Every morning. And every night, she undid them.”

_I am lost without her_, she wants to say. But then she may cry. And she’s been working too hard to rebuild her strength lately to allow that.

“She was clever,” Jon says.

“In so many ways. In every way. She spoke nineteen languages.”

Jon raises his brow slightly, impressed. It makes Dany feel proud. She’s smiling softly as she turns her focus back to her hair. She breaths—and she starts the braid over. _Begin again_, she tells herself. For a moment, she can hear the soft tinkling of bells, gusts whizzing past her ears whilst on Drogon’s back, Ser Jorah’s voice saying _khaleesi_, Missandei’s laughter. _Begin again._

“I don’t know how your…” Jon trails off. He swallows; Dany spots his Adam’s apple bob severely when she sneaks a glance at him in the looking glass. “…Our. I don’t know how our family does death. But…if Dragonstone has a crypt, like Winterfell…I can get someone to lay her there to rest. With a statue. So she’ll be with you always.”

Dany can feel her heart stretching open, a widening ache. Her fingers begin trembling in her hair. It does not pass her notice that this is the first time she has ever heard Jon claim his Targaryen heritage. It doesn’t pass her notice that this is the first time he’s ever spoken of it whilst standing so close to her.

She can feel his eyes on her, watching her carefully. Waiting. She waits, too. She waits to feel frightened, threatened, angry. But the feeling never comes. Instead, she wants terribly to cry, because the thought of Missandei resting with her (their) family fills her with a deep longing.

“We burn our dead,” Dany finally tells him. Her voice is careful. She realizes all at once that she is
the only person alive who can truly teach Jon anything about what it means to *be* a Targaryen. He could read every book in the Citadel but still wouldn’t know what it really means. She had been selfish to deny him that part of himself.

“I suppose that doesn’t come as a shock in retrospect,” Jon comments. He almost sounds sheepish. It pulls a small, brief smile from Dany.

“But the ashes of our dead were placed in the Sept of Baelor. Not my mother, though.” Dany ties off her pathetic looking braid absentmindedly, and once she has, she fiddles with Rhaella’s ring. The only thing left of her. “Or my brothers.”

She and Jon lock eyes in the looking glass.

The moment is heavy. Dany’s breaths freeze in her chest. She is hyperaware of every inch of her own body, hyperaware of the spaces between them. The intensity of his body heat. The intensity of his gaze.

She watches him lift his hand up through the looking glass. She follows its path. She feels the light pressure of his touch against her hair.

“You did it,” he tells her gruffly, quietly.

Dany’s heart is racing within her chest. She’s not sure what to say back. Or how to say anything at all.

This is the closest they’ve been since Winterfell. Since everything fell apart. She’s terrified to ruin it.

“Eddard Stark was my father, but he wasn’t fully my father in the way he was to my siblings— I always knew that, even before I knew the truth. I assumed it was because I was kept at a distance because I was a bastard. But I’m not a bastard. And I had a real mother and a real father. My father. Dany…would you think foolishly of me if I told you I’ve felt so guilt-ridden around you because I keep thinking about how you’re his little sister? I think of Arya…how I cherished her, how I would have done anything in the world to protect her…and it’s difficult to not feel as if I’m betraying my father. Betraying Rhaegar. You’re his baby sister.”

Hope is the first thing to sprout within Dany’s heart. After it, she can’t help but laugh. It’s soft and hesitant at first, but then it grows, and Jon scowls.

“I’m sorry,” she says genuinely. She fights the smile back. “It’s just…Jon. Had things gone differently…had you grown up Aegon Targaryen…do you realize that we likely would have been betrothed? We’d no doubt be married right now.”

He clearly hadn’t realized that. She watches his dark eyes twinkle with surprise.

“But I’d be your nephew…I am your nephew.”

Dany turns around to face him. She’d expected this conversation to be full of anger, disgust, and rejection, but instead, she feels empowered. It feels good to get it out in the open. To understand where Jon’s mind is. To try and help him understand hers.

“And you’re my age. And a Targaryen. Growing up, I always just expected that I’d be married off to my brother Viserys. My mother and father were brother and sister. My father’s parents were brother and sister. Aegon the Conqueror was married to *two* of his sisters. Rhaenyra Targaryen married her uncle. Rhaegar wouldn’t have seen it as a betrayal, Jon. He would’ve orchestrated it.”
Jon is quiet for a beat. Dany waits, her hands fiddling a bit with her poorly-done hair as she does.

“I’ve been reading some. There are instances of uncles marrying their nieces in the Stark line. But it’s certainly not as common.”

Dany inclines her head in agreement. It makes her wound throb. “You couldn’t find a bloodline where it’s as common as ours.”

He looks tormented for the first time. “But that doesn’t make it right, Dany.”

She dares to step closer. Not much, just a half-step. It’s a test more than anything.

He does not step back.

“And what makes it wrong?” she asks softly. She studies his eyes. “The Faith of the Seven condemns brother and sister relations, mother and son relations, and father and daughter relations. Am I your sister? Your mother? Your daughter?”

He reaches up and sets a hand against her cheek. It burns her skin like he’s fire made flesh.

“You’re my blood,” he tells her softly, sadly.

“Yes,” she agrees. She places her hand atop his. “And we’re the only blood left.”

His eyes drift down to her midriff. “What if…”

“She won’t be. You underestimate how much wolf’s blood you have in your veins.”

He swallows hard again. She holds her breath as he turns his face towards her, closer, as if he’s being drawn forward by some force he can’t control.

“How can I, Dany?” he breathes. She can feel each word against her lips. Her eyes flutter shut; she reaches up and loops her arms around his neck. His forehead presses gently against hers, so gently that Dany knows he’s not forgotten her injury. She can practically taste his lips. His next words are hardly more than an anguished breath. “And how can I not?”

She won’t be the one to kiss him first. What felt like ages ago now, he asked for time. For patience. Dany won’t deny him that now. So she waits, her breaths bated, his lips so close to hers they brush by accident every couple of seconds. She can feel Jon’s pulse racing hot in his neck from where her arms are looped. His body is brimming with energy; the few centimeters between them feels heavy, alive. It feels torturous. But she won’t give him anything he can’t bear.

He seems to be stuck. Between his desires and his hesitations. Between his view of who he thought he was and who he might have been. Dany knows how painful that can be, and she doesn’t wish pain on him. Not anymore. When had that happened?

“It’s okay,” she breathes against his lips, giving him the only thing she can. “It’s all right, Jon. It’s okay to be who you are.”

She says it hoping it will comfort him.

She says it hoping he’ll understand that she’s done trying to force him to hide his birthname.

She says it expecting him to move away, expecting him to decide who he ‘is’ is a Stark. A modern Stark that would find it dishonorable to bed an aunt. In that moment, she thinks she can handle that. Because at least she understands now that it’s not rejection towards her personally.
But that’s not the choice he makes at all. When his lips meld against hers, it sweeps her away into the fire. She burns, and burns, and burns, longing to make ash and be ash, unsure of anything in the world but his body pressing hers and his mouth where it belongs. He backs them up, growing feverish with every second that passes, and Dany’s blood is racing so fast now that she feels her wound grow damp with new blood. It throbs. She throbs. Her mind sways like she’s off at sea. A burning sea.

Inadvertently, it’s Dany who ends it. As Jon’s hands caress through her hair, pulling at her braid, she flinches, her wound searing with intense pain she can’t ignore. She feels a trickle of blood on her forehead. Jon breaks his lips from hers like he’s been doused with ice water.

“Oh,” he says, startled, almost like he’s coming back into his own head. Dany edges back just enough to have room to reach up and touch her wound. Her fingers come back bloodstained.

“Here,” he tells her, his palm applying gentle but firm pressure over her wound. His bare hand. “You should sit. Here…”

She’s thinking about her blood against his skin as he eases her back towards a chair. She sits without complaint, his hand still applying pressure to her wound, her heart lodged somewhere in her throat.

He meets her eyes as he gently lifts his hand to check on the bleeding. Dany touches his knee.

“Fire and blood,” she hears herself say.

It means something entirely different to her in that moment than what it used to. It means more.

VI.

“A careful, rehearsed speech is a proper first outing for you, Your Grace. Not stepping out into the war-ravaged streets of King’s Landing amongst smallfolk who haven’t really fully accepted your rule yet—”

Daenerys interrupts Tyrion.

“I have outgrown your caution. I won’t win anything with tiptoeing. If my people are unsure of me, they should meet me.”

Tyrion walks quicker to catch up with Dany’s increased pace. He is openly horrified.

“Your Grace! They will stone you, throw feces at you, possibly attack you!”

“No,” Dany says, spotting the person waiting for her up ahead. Grey Worm glances back at them as they approach him. “They won’t. But if you’re frightened, you may go back into the temporary Keep.”

He is relentless. “You’re not well! Your head is still split open!”

She ignores him and keeps a brisk pace with Grey Worm. They leave the guarded court around the makeshift Keep, stepping out into an ash and dust-filled road, most of the bricks laying in exploded pieces beneath their feet. Dany is careful to mind her step; though her thoughtful clothing choice keeps her state more or less ambiguous, she’s been feeling like her center of gravity is off lately.

She and Grey Worm encounter their first people only a couple long strides from the entrance to the new Keep. To Dany’s delight, it’s a chubby little boy and his mother. He’s in a soapy bathing tub, his mother scrubbing behind his ears dutifully with a course, dirty rag, and he sees Dany before his
mother does. Dany is wearing no crown, no ornaments. She knows, to him, she’s just an ordinary person.

Oddly, that thrills her. She smiles widely.

“Hello,” she greets, and the little boy smiles back.

His mother glances over her shoulder distractedly, and at first, she doesn’t seem to realize who she’s seeing either. But after a couple blinks and another look, she jumps to her feet, her lips parting in shock and fear.

“I—” it takes her a moment to come to her senses. She sinks down to shaky knees. She bows her head, trembling in fear. “Your Grace. I…I can take the boy and the tub inside if I’ve offended you, we were merely enjoying the sun, I can take them inside—”

“There’s no need for that,” Dany tells her firmly. “The sun is lovely, isn’t it?”

The boy nods. Dany steps closer, but touches Grey Worm’s hand gently to keep him from advancing with her.

“Have you a need for anything?” Dany asks the woman. She turns a critical eye on the boy, the clothes on a nearby chair, the newly-built home the two are living in. She turns back to the woman. “Food? Medicines? Aid?”

It appears that the woman has no idea how to even answer a question like that. She opens and closes her lips multiple times, never quite managing to utter anything in response.

“Some new clothes, perhaps,” Dany muses, her eyes falling back on the little boy’s hole-ridden trousers. She thinks she may even see singe-marks. “Have the soldiers been delivering food daily?”

The woman nods. It takes her a moment, but she finally speaks up. “They rebuilt our house. They pass food out two times each day.”

“Is it to your liking?”

“Yes, Your Grace,” the woman answers, and Dany believes her by the wistful way she says: “Today we were given meat. We haven’t had meat since…” she trails off uncertainly.

Dany’s heart is warm. Content. For a moment, she hears a whisper of *mhsysa.*

“Splendid,” she says softly. “Should you need anything, you tell my soldiers.”

“I…yes, Your Grace. Thank you, Your Grace.”

Tyrion catches up with her as she continues walking.

“You’ll regret that,” he tells her, “they’ll want something more each and every day.”

She looks down at him. She can feel the sunlight warming her cheekbones, her bare shoulders.

“We should always want something more.”

VII.

She wants more for herself.
Her temporary Throne brings her satisfaction only when she’s helping others from atop it, but still she craves something else. It’s what she’s always craved: home.

She feels it sometimes. When Jon’s lips are on hers. When he’s giving her his ghost-smile, his eyes filled with light. In quiet moments when her palm is resting over her growing swell.

Home. The thing that can’t come yet. The thing that might not ever come. Her head begins to heal fully, but the safety of her rule remains shaky at best. While her people begin to embrace her, some more willingly than others, she and Jon are faced with dissent from Winterfell and neighboring houses, proclaiming Jon the rightful heir. Dany receives word of increased slavery activity in and around Volantis, and she becomes preoccupied with worry for her people of Essos.

And Drogon is still gone.

“What is it?”

Dany opens her eyes at Jon’s question. He hovers his face over hers, his brow furrowed. His fingers play with the ends of her hair splayed out around her on the bed.

“Sansa. Drogon. Essos,” she answers quietly. She’s been preoccupied all day. Worried.

“Don’t worry about Sansa—”

“What was the outcome the last time you said that?” Dany interrupts.

“I’ve been exchanging words with her, she means you no ill-harm—”

Dany sits up. The blankets pool at her waist, but the roaring fire keeps her skin from pebbling at the nighttime chill.

“Did you tell her about our child?”

Jon shakes his head at once. “No. Never, Dany.”

She’s got no choice but to trust him. It’s a game they’ve been playing lately: he trusts her, she trusts him, he trusts her, she trusts him. So far, neither has let the other down. Neither has lost.

“She wants you on the throne.”

“I know she does,” Jon says, and Dany’s just relieved that he sees that now, that he’ll admit it. “She wants me there because she knows I’ll give the North their freedom. It’s time we talk about it.”

She doesn’t feel right about it. “I should grant the North independence in reward for treason?”

“No. You should grant the North its independence because the North will never accept Southern rule. Ever.”

“But they don’t care that you don’t want it, do they?” Dany points out.

Jon’s expression twists. “No. They don’t.”

Dany lies back against the pillows. She stares up at the ceiling, and then she turns to look out of the opened window at the star-streaked sky.

“I will open talks with the North. Sansa, as Warden of the North, will be invited to come here for discussions. That is all I’m giving right now.”
“Sansa won’t come down here for that.”

“I’m not going to Winterfell.” She doesn’t want to go to Winterfell ever again.

“And you shouldn’t. Sansa wants Northern independence, she doesn’t want negotiations. She won’t stop pressing my claim until she gets it.”

“And I won’t be intimidated and threatened,” Dany snaps. “What happens when other houses start threatening my claim to get their way? What will I have left?”

His hand smoothes her hair back from her face gently. She sinks deeper in the pillow, her body automatically relaxing at his touch despite the worries flooding her brain.

“That’s not what I’m suggesting,” he says softly.

“Then what are you suggesting?” Dany asks sharply.

“A compromise.”

“Such as?”

He hovers his face above hers once more, his eyes searing straight through hers. “A marriage. An alliance.”

Dany ignores the trembling of her heart.

“I don’t think Sansa has much interest in taking my hand,” she quips.

“Then I suppose I could stand in her place and fulfill that duty.”

Dany had always known she would marry one day. It was the fastest way to broker alliances; it was an invaluable tool towards political success. But she hadn’t imagined that she might ever marry someone who set her aflame like Jon did. In that way, the prospect was terrifying.

“I thought you didn’t want to rule,” she finally says faintly.

“I don’t.”

“If you marry me, you’ll be king.”

“That matters not. What matters is that you’re Queen.”

Dany studies his dark eyes. “Some in the North will be satiated by that. But will Sansa? Will Arya?”

“I truly believe they’ll come around more willingly if it’s me they’re dealing with. But it doesn’t matter: they can’t press my claim to the throne if I’m already wedded to it.”

“They could try.”

“Let them. No one would ask me to turn against my queen. Or my wife. This may not be enough to win Sansa over— I’ve told you what that will take— but it will be enough to keep the entire North from rebelling. Enough to keep the peace.”

It took her some time to realize that she was afraid. It was silly of her; marriage was a commonplace duty. It meant nothing. But with Jon, everything meant something. And what if he woke up tomorrow and couldn’t live with himself for being with her? Worse— what if he betrayed her? It
would be much easier for him to do from his spot beside her on the Throne.

“It’s the best way,” he tells her. He brushes her cheek lightly. “And certainly the most preferable choice of them all.”

That soothes a bit of her fear, but not all of it. Dany’s not even sure what other choices are available to her. Punishing Sansa for her treason feels wrong now, almost like kinslaying, but bending her will to treacherous threats won’t work either.

“We can talk to Tyrion in the morning,” Dany decides. “And Ser Davos as well.”

He relaxes beside her once more. Dany rests her head against his shoulder and closes her eyes.

“It still doesn’t make Drogon come back. Or stop the rot that is slavery from spreading once more in Essos.”

“No,” Jon agrees. “It doesn’t. But it’s a start. All things must start somewhere.”

She presses her face against his arm as his hand moves to rest over her stomach. Her smile is hidden against his skin.

“A girl, you say?” he asks, his voice surprisingly tender.

“Yes.” She’s certain, though she can’t explain how she knows. She just knows like she knew with Rhaego.

Jon’s never touched her stomach like this, like he’s acknowledging the blossoming life within it. It affects Dany in more ways than she knows how to describe. It pulls fruit from the briars of her wounded heart. She reaches down and covers his hand with hers, holding it there, breathing with him. *She’s a miracle,* she wants to remind him. But she thinks he already knows.

“It’ll be better for her, too,” he points out softly. “You’re our queen, and the people are beginning to trust you. To love you. They won’t cast you to the side over a bastard child. But trust me when I say our child’s life will be infinitely better if she’s born true.”

He would know. Just as Dany knows what it’s like to grow up hunted down for a name you never chose, hunted down to protect a usurper’s false crown. Both fates are no good for their daughter. They must do whatever they can to prevent the cycle from continuing. Here, she must also break the wheel.

Here, she must want more for herself, for Jon, for her child. For her people, Essos and Westeros alike.

Then, and only then, she thinks she might be able to find *home.*
Moggett and HAllove commented last chapter and suggested Jon's POV, and I really wanted to give it a go after how muddled Jon's motivations have seemed at times throughout season 8. It turned out to be a lot more challenging than I expected; I've rewritten parts of this chapter quite a few times in an attempt to get it exactly right. I'm still not overly happy with it, but I liked slipping into Jon's head for a spell and trying to picture where he's at with all of this. Hope it reads okay! I'll be back with Dany's POV next chapter.

I have nothing nice to say about the series finale.....I'm living in this universe where the end of Ep 5 and Ep 6 never happened. The only thing I'm taking from the series finale is the fact that Bran is low-key (high-key??) the villain. I can get behind that.

Also...as a side-note...I feel you guys on the frustration with Sansa's attitude towards Dany this season. I'm right there with you, I promise! But because I'm trying to stay more-or-less canon with the events of Ep 1-4 (god help me...), and it's been established that Sansa's on her anti-Dany, power-crazy kick, that's a plot line I'm going to play around with and (eventually) resolve. Just know....I am with you and in my feelings about it, too!

I.

“You’re back late.”

Davos’s voice comes unexpectedly from the inner depths of Jon’s chambers. Jon startles and stops in the doorway, taken off guard in the late hour. After spotting Ser Davos at the small table near the window, he sighs and continues into the room. The door sounds impossibly loud in the quiet as he pushes it closed.

“How is she?” Ser Davos continues, his tone conversational.

Jon removes Longclaw and props the sword by the fireplace. He answers Davos as he removes his boots.

“Who said I was with the queen?” Jon asks.

The chair creaks as Davos leans forward. “Well,” he says, taking a drink from a flagon front of him, “it’s nearly dawn, and I don’t imagine you were out whoring like every other man we brought South with us.”

“Are those my only options? Whoring or spending the night with the queen?”

“Aye. And only one of those is truly your style,” Davos quips. He waits as Jon strips some of his outer layers off. Jon wants nothing more than to fall in bed and sleep. He’d considered staying in Dany’s bed, but he didn’t like the thought of Dany’s handmaidens finding them in the morning. The nature of their relationship is their business.
“Queen Daenerys is…?” Davos prompts once more, undeterred by Jon’s sullen secrecy.

*Healing,* Jon thinks. An image of Dany stirs in his mind’s eye, her soft hair spread out underneath her like a puddle of molten silver, moonlight glowing on her cheeks, her collarbones, her navel. Jon feels his stomach tighten, his heart jolt. Another word comes to mind. *Beautiful.*

He sits heavily on the bed, unwilling to give those words to Davos. Unwilling to share those parts of himself with anyone. They’re primitive, raw, secret. He doesn’t want anyone to see his heart.

“She’s fine,” Jon answers shortly.

“You’ve been alone with her for hours. I’d say she’s more than just ‘fine’.”

Jon cuts his eyes at Davos. He’s not sure why, but that comment sits poorly with him. Whether or not it was how Davos intended it, Jon feels their queen’s honor is being held in question.

“She’s fine,” he repeats, his tone dangerous now.

“You’d think you’d be in a better mood,” Davos mutters beneath his breath. Jon ignores this entirely.

“I have something for you. A raven came. And I have some bad news. Which first?”

“The raven is good news?”

“Well, no. The raven is also bad news.”

Jon bows his head for a moment, exhaustion dragging him down. He suddenly wishes he’d stayed with Dany. Handmaidens’ gossip be damned.

“The raven is from Winterfell,” he states rather than asks, because he knows.

“Aye. Your sister.”

Jon kneads over his forehead for a moment. He can feel a headache building. “The bad news?”

“You were right yesterday when you said you suspected some of our Northern forces had fled back to the North. We were missing thirty-two at count this morning.”

Jon is so tired that he considers leaving it be for right now. He considers telling Davos to take the letter and come back in the morning. He could deal with treasonous sisters and deserters then. But he can’t stop thinking about Dany’s silence earlier in the evening, her preoccupied gaze and her visible stress. More than anything else, he wants to protect her, to shield her from any more pain or stress. Any harm. He wants to regain his honor in her eyes. He wants to make her proud. And in order to do that, he has to find a way to deal with Sansa. He’s never been good at that.

Still, he stands and crosses over to take the folded parchment from Davos. He doesn’t even bother to sit. He opens the paper and studies Sansa’s words. He only makes it three sentences in before he’s too annoyed to continue. He scowls, flings the letter at Davos, and mutters: “She takes me for a fool.”

“Perhaps so,” Davos agrees, his eyes on Sansa’s treasonous words. He looks back at Jon. “Should I dispose of it?”

The question is complicated and agonizing. Jon sits again, bows his head again. He digs his fingers into his hair and sighs. It drags on and on, a brief airing of the churning frustration chained up within him.
If he has Davos burn the letter to hide it from their queen, he’s as treasonous as Sansa.

If he takes the letter to their queen, he’s as good as a kinslayer.

“You’ve got a decision to make,” Davos says gruffly. “I don’t envy it.”

Jon doesn’t answer. He digs his nails into his scalp and inhales through his clenched teeth. In that moment, he would have given anything just for three minutes with his father. With Eddard Stark. He doesn’t know what to do. It isn’t as simple as deciding where his true loyalties lie. His loyalties lie in two places, in two houses. In two families. And he can’t help but feel like he could talk sense into Sansa if he only tried again… if he only figured out what to say or do to appease her.

“I need to meet with her,” Jon mutters.

“You’ll have more luck convincing our queen to turn a blind eye to her treason than you’ll have convincing Sansa to bend the knee to ‘the Dragon Queen’,” Davos snorts. He shakes the letter emphatically. "You can feel her hatred through the ink. It's almost impressive."

Jon shakes his head. “Neither will sway. Not on this. Daenerys is not going to give into Sansa’s demands, not now that Sansa’s somehow convinced some of our soldiers to return back home to her. Not now that she's actively committing treason.”

“Then, as I said before, you’ve got a choice to make.”

Jon looks over at Davos. “I can’t just condemn my sister to death—”

Davos shakes the letter again. “And you can’t allow her to march her banners south in your name—”

“Of course not! Of course I can’t! She won’t!”

“She will,” Davos counters, calm but severe. “She’s taking advantage of the queen’s weakness. She knows the queen is convalescing. She knows she’s been gravely injured. Jon, you’ve overestimated Sansa’s loyalty before. Don’t make that mistake again.”

Jon feels sick. He levels a serious look Davos’s way. “If I hand Daenerys that letter…”

“She’ll have her arrested, tried, and executed. As she should. If I were her Hand, I’d advise just that.”

“There’s got to be a better way,” Jon says. He rises and crosses the room in a few long strides, falling to sit across from Davos at the small table. “The queen and I can marry. That will at least force Sansa to stop using my birthright as the reason behind her treason. She’s convincing our men that I’m the true heir, that Daenerys has stolen the Throne from me, that we need a Northman on the Throne… well, if the queen and I marry, I’ll be on the Throne, and Sansa won’t have anything else to complain about.”

Davos considers that. “It may help temporarily. But it won’t solve anything fully. She wants Northern independence. She wants to rule. Is our queen going to let that happen?”

“No,” Jon admits. He doesn’t know why, but he thinks suddenly of the sweet swell of Dany’s stomach. The unbidden image fills his heart with a protective tenderness that blooms within him. His throat tightens. He clenches his fists and moves them to his lap. “But it will give us time. Once Sansa no longer has my claim to obsess over, my claim to use to rouse the banners, she’ll have no choice but to sit down and negotiate with us. Northern houses aren’t going to march behind her and start another war simply because Sansa doesn’t like our queen, and without my ‘claim’, she has no other
reason to start a war. Daenerys has done nothing but help the North and even the most stubborn of
the Northern lords have to see that.”

“Aye,” Davos agrees. “But the wedding will have to be fast; we’ll have to get word to the Northern
lords as quickly as possible so that they can stop whatever sort of rebellion Sansa’s started. And we’ll
need our armies ready just in case.”

Jon doesn’t say anything in response to that. His thoughts are very far from armies and war. They're
still on Dany. On the life growing within her. On her smile that sets her aglow.

“That still leaves us with the problem of this letter,” Davos reminds him.

Jon knows what he must do. But that doesn’t mean it’s easy. He holds his hand out. Davos seems
slightly relieved as he passes the letter to Jon.

“When will you give it to her?”

“In the morning,” Jon says. He’s filled with dread. “Afterwards, we can all meet to discuss our next
steps.”

“Assuming the queen doesn’t send for Sansa's head at once,” Davos mutters.

Jon has nothing to say back to that. If Dany becomes worried about her realm’s safety, her safety,
their child’s safety…she may do just that. But Jon has faith that she’s in a better place now, a place
where she’ll listen to reason. Sending for Sansa Stark’s head wouldn’t prevent a war: it would cause
one.

“I'll speak with her,” Jon says.

“Be it on your head.”

“So it will be,” Jon says curtly.

Davos stands.

“I’ll let you retire for what hours of sleep remain. We’ll discuss this further tomorrow.”

Jon nods Davos’s way in parting. He had been so exhausted from the moment he stepped into his
chambers, but when he finally trips down to his smallclothes and collapses beneath his blankets,
sleep evades him. He tosses and turns ‘til the first light of dawn, fighting the urge to go back to Dany
every couple of minutes, his mind bursting with worry after worry after worry. He sometimes wishes
he cared little for honor; if he simply followed his impulses and his heart like most everybody else,
his life would be far less complicated.

When the night sky begins bleaching blue with dawn, Jon gives up on sleep. He dresses for the day,
his entire body achy and stiff from no rest. He encounters nearly no one in the corridor, save
two handmaidens. Their arms are laden with bed linens.

“Will you take your meal now, Lord Snow?”

Jon doesn’t feel even the slightest twinge of hunger yet. He and Dany had eaten quite late the night
prior, each consuming half of a large meal.

“No, not quite yet,” he answers.

He knows he ought to tell them where to send Tyrion or Davos should they come looking for him,
Daenerys’s court had been moved temporarily to what remains of the Red Keep, a structure called the ‘Maidenvault’ by Tyrion and other southerners. Beyond some fire damage to the roof on the leftmost side, it is largely intact. After the destruction of King’s Landing, burdened with a gravely-injured queen, they’d had little time to discuss where they should settle until King’s Landing could be rebuilt, until the Red Keep could be repaired in full. They had gone here simply because there was no where else to go. Jon, in particular, had only cared that it was shelter, a place for Dany to recover.

Now, though, he wishes they’d gone somewhere different. It’s not large enough to accommodate all the people who are there; the only area that’s not cramped full is the small wing Dany’s chambers resides in. By the time Jon makes it to the main hall, it’s bursting with activity despite the early hour. He nods at the people who greet him, keeping his eyes downturned as he speeds through the throng of people as quickly as he can.

There’s one place he knows of that still brings some semblance of peace, and that’s where he heads. The early morning is brisk; Jon slows his pace as soon as he’s far from the nearest group of soldiers and tries to enjoy the cool air. By the time he makes it to the half-collapsed greenhouse— small even in pre-destruction times and smaller now that the decorative stained-glass walls are half-shattered and the iron frame is caved in—he has half a mind to stay there all day. It’s not that it’s comfortable; there’s broken glass on the floor, barely enough room for him to stand properly, and only a stone bench to rest on. But it’s private. From far off, it looks too destroyed to bother with. As far as Jon knows, he is the only person who’s ventured into it. Well, he and the person he brought the last time he was here.

He ducks underneath the sagging iron doorway and avoids a particularly jagged piece of broken glass. The colorful shards on the floor crunch and slide beneath his boots. He has to keep his head and shoulders tucked as he navigates beneath the portion of the roof that’s caved in, but soon he steps out into the intact side of the greenhouse. And he’s not alone. He stops in place.

“I can go,” Dany says, her back still to him. He wonders how she’s so certain it’s him. “If you want to be alone.”

She’s sitting tall on the stone bench, her hair flowing down her back in an elaborate three-braid twist, her shoulders bared in whatever Southern dress she has on today. Jon continues forward, his steps a bit softer now. He rounds the bench and sits beside her. She’d been looking at the stained glass wall right in front of them—a shattered piece of work that had once shown vivid vignettes of the history of King’s Landing (of her (their) ancestors’ history)— but she looks up as Jon joins her. He meets her striking eyes, more violet now in the morning light than they’d been late last night.

“I can be alone with you,” he tells her, looking back at the colorful glass in front of them. She does, too.

He doesn’t want to tell her about Sansa. He knows he needs to, but as they sit together in the cool morning air and watch the glass in front of them light up with the rising sun, he can’t imagine taking her peace from her. Selfishly, he doesn’t want to take his own peace away, either. It’s quiet here, save for the far-off sounds of the city, and there’s something reverent in the half-destroyed space. Something holy in the wall in front of them, its intricate pieces shattered but still wedged in place inside the iron framing. One push against it would send the entire thing raining to the ground like glass raindrops. But if it were protected, sheltered, let alone…those shattered pieces would stay inside that frame forever.
Never as beautiful as it had once been. Never as perfect. But worth saving.

“It’s early,” Jon finally says, first to break the silence. “Couldn’t sleep?”

“No,” she answers. He feels her gaze settle on the side of his face. “And yourself?”

He turns and meets her eyes. He sees her exhaustion in the bruises beneath her eyes. “I couldn’t, either.”

I should have stayed, he wants to say. He’s certain that they both would have slept if he had.

For a moment, he thinks she might say what he hadn’t. Her lips part slightly as if she’s about to speak. But she seems to decide differently. She presses her lips together and looks away. Jon watches from the corner of his eye as she clasps her hands in her lap and inhales deeply. He feels an odd tug at his heart.

“I wish I’d stayed with you,” he hears himself say suddenly, his voice gruff. “I would’ve slept. I wanted to be with you.”

He feels horrifically vulnerable after admitting that, but he’s not fool enough to forget all the times she’s opened up to him and made herself vulnerable. All the times he’s betrayed her trust and let her down by meeting that vulnerability with absence. He’s not willing to do that now. He still struggles with his desire for her and his fear of that desire, but seeing her on death’s door had changed things for him. She is his family. Really, she’s his closest living family. And he loves her, too. He believes in her like he believes in nothing else.

“You could have stayed,” she tells him, her voice ardent yet somehow still so regal. He’d never understood how she could do that: make him feel like he’s the most important and cherished person in the world, while also exuding the power that proves she really is.

He almost explains why he hadn’t: he still desires privacy when it comes to matters of the heart, and he wants to hoard their relationship, keep it secret for only them. A thing he shares with her and her only. A thing to protect from the misunderstandings of strangers and enemies.

But if they marry, they’ll be on display for all of Westeros. It comes with the territory, and he knows that, and it doesn’t change his mind about anything. But part of him still wishes he could keep her to himself for just a bit longer. If he could have brought her and their child away to the North to live with him in peace for the rest of their lives, he would have.

(And though he doesn’t tell her, part of him still fears the desire he has for her, the inferno he thinks might one day consume him, heart and mind alike. But that isn’t so easily explained. That is fear he knows he must live with, a fear he knows has sprouted, somehow, from love.)

“I will from now on. For as long as you’ll have me.” He means it. And that feels freeing.

She leans her head against his arm. He can smell her rose-oil soap, the sweet fragrance clinging to each tendril of silver hair. He turns his head and leans down, hiding his face into her hair. So the sweetness and softness and quiet can overtake him for just one moment. He always feels like they’re stealing these moments of peace together, like the comfort is something that couldn’t possibly belong to them. Couldn’t possibly be for them. Something they must take before it disappears entirely.

I’ll do right by her from now on, he thinks. I promise.

Across from them, the shattered face of the man he makes that promise to lights up underneath the light of the rising sun.
He pulls the letter out over their shared morning meal.

He’s eating simply to ensure that she eats, but he has no appetite. His stress over what Dany might say (and do) about Sansa’s treason leaves him nauseated. After he chokes down his half of breakfast and checks that she’s eaten, too, he pushes the tray forward and sets the letter face-down in its place. Dany looks from the letter to him.

“The North?” she asks him, her voice cool and measured.

He nods once, his mouth set in a firm line. Right before she flips the letter over, he reaches out and sets his hand on her leg. He’s not sure if it’s there in comfort or caution.

He stares at the table as she reads it. It doesn’t take her long. She sets it back down on the table when she’s finished. Face down.

The silence between them is a dark winged shadow. Jon closes his eyes.

“I presume you have a case to plead on Sansa’s behalf.” She sounds curt, tired. He’s not sure what he expected to hear in her voice, but it wasn’t that.

“Just one,” he says, and when he turns and looks at her, he’s startled to see angry tears gathered in the corners of her eyes. Her chin is held high, but Jon sees the way her lips tremble slightly. His brain is utterly wiped clean; he forgets what he was going to say, his hands rising to gently cup her face.

“Dany…”

“It doesn’t matter what I do. What I say. What I offer. She’s never going to stop. Don’t you see that, Jon? She’s never going to stop. And she’s conspired against you as much as me this time. She convinced your Northern soldiers to return to her— your men that are supposed to be loyal to you. If this were really about her wanting you to lead, she would follow your lead. She would trust your decisions. But it’s not about that at all. I don’t even think she’d be satisfied with Northern independence at this point. She’s manipulating you— she’s manipulating everyone. I don’t know what else to say to make you see that.”

Somewhere deep down, he already sees that. It frightens him deeply. He had once told Theon that he could be both a Stark and a Greyjoy. That the two sides didn’t have to be in competition. He had hoped he, too, could be both— a Stark and a Targaryen. But he realizes he’s already been placed in a situation where both is impossible. Either he betrays the sister he grew up with, or he betrays his queen, the mother of his child. He betrays the Starks or he betrays the Targaryens. Davos was right: he’s got a terrible choice to make.

But as he gazes at Dany’s face, her cheeks warm and soft beneath his fingers, her eyes holding such hurt and worry that it makes him feel physically ill on her behalf, he knows he’s already made his mind up. He’s just been too afraid to admit it.

He strokes her cheeks gently with his thumbs, his eyes studying hers. When he leans in and kisses her lips softly, her wet eyelashes brush against his face.

“This is treason,” he says quietly, his lips only a breath away from hers. His heart fills his entire chest with aching. “I know what this is, Dany. I know what it means.”

She reaches up to loop her arms around his neck, sliding closer to him. Jon feels her tremble slightly, though he’s not sure if it’s from anger or relief.
“We have to be very careful now,” he tells her, though he’s certain she knows that better than he does. “Executions can sometimes spur rebellions instead of quelling them. I’m not saying we sit back and let her march south with whatever banners she can rouse. I’m not saying what she’s done doesn’t warrant a trial or even an execution. But I am saying that executing her right now— before we win the rest of the North back into our favor— is only going to make things worse. The worst thing we could do is give them a martyr. The worst thing we could do is give them a reason.”

“And how are we meant to win the rest of the North over before she organizes her rebellion when it seems as though she’s already started?” Dany asks. “Do you really think a marriage will make that much of a difference?”

“Yes, I think it will. Those rallying against you are doing so because Sansa’s told them it’s for me, to win my rightful place on the Throne. If I’m already on the Throne, they won’t have much to fight for. And without that reason— getting me on the Throne—the North has no reason to go against you. No reason to get caught up in another costly war. Don’t forget, Dany: many of those Houses fought alongside you against the Night King. You’ve proven your dedication to them. The North remembers.”

“Tell that to your Starks. They haven’t remembered a damn thing I’ve ever done for them.”

There is no way to defend them. He would have if he could have. But she isn’t saying anything that isn’t true. Not for the first time, Jon is ashamed of his family. How quickly they grew to distrust everyone outside of themselves. How quickly they turned into what their father always despised. And at the back of Jon’s mind, running on a loop ever since he found out his birth identity, he’s been asking himself: how long until they cast me out? How long until the dragon’s blood taints the wolf’s? How long until I, too, become an outsider they can’t trust? Has it already happened?

“We may not ever win them over,” Jon admits. It makes his heart sting, but there’s nothing to be done for it. There’s no way to turn back the clock, to unhurt those who have been hurt, to undo lessons taught through pain. “But we can make strides with the others. And in order to do that, a trip North will be inevitable.”

She frowns at once. “I can’t leave now. Things aren’t stable enough yet; it would be suicide to go. And even if I could somehow secure things enough here to leave Tyrion ruling in my stead, my state is going to be obvious soon. I’ve only got a few dresses left that somewhat hide it. By the time we made it to Winterfell, I’d be showing earnestly, and something tells me that won’t help convince Sansa to stand down.”

No, it certainly wouldn’t. Jon knows that as well as Dany does. If they showed up to Winterfell together, Dany obviously with child, Sansa would somehow twist that around on Dany. She’d accuse her of manipulating Jon by getting pregnant, of lording the child over his head, of forcing him to give up his claim to the throne, to bend the knee…

He isn’t willing to see his unborn child turned into a political piece in Sansa’s games. He isn’t willing to sit by while she says one more nasty, unearned thing to Daenerys, either.

“I agree,” Jon says. “It’s a trip I’ll have to make. I’ll have to go speak with Sansa, and soon. Sansa and the Northern lords. She’s acted against me, after all. She’s calling them to rebel in my name. I can’t fix that from here. I’ll have to go back to Winterfell.”

How is it that going North suddenly feels like a necessary evil? Going back to Winterfell should feel like going home. But he can’t get himself to feel anything but exhausted resignation at the idea.

Dany clearly feels even worse about it than he does. She pulls away from him, her face falling at
once. He thinks about his own words only a couple hours prior when he’d sworn he wouldn’t spend another night outside her bed as long as she’d have him. He wonders if she’s thinking of them, too. If he’s just ruined all the fragile trust he’d rebuilt. Suddenly, he can’t think of anything but that stained glass wall, broken in thousands of pieces but still whole. Was this the one tiny push needed to send it raining to the ground?

“Last night you said we should marry. Now you’re saying you’ve got to leave,” she says. She looks back at him. “Every evening, you’re kissing me ’til I can’t breathe— and every night, you leave, ashamed to be seen with me. Won’t you ever be certain of what you want, Jon? Won’t you ever make up your mind?”

Her words send an unexplained chill down his spine. He feels shame lay heavy and sick in the pit of his stomach.

“I have made up my mind,” he tells her, taking her face in his hands once more. He studies her eyes, her lips. His love and desire fills his entire chest with heat. “When I go North, it’ll be temporary, and it’ll be on our behalf. On your behalf. You’re…” he trails off as her eyes drop from his, realizing the misstep before he takes it. Because she’s more than just his queen. He’d be remiss to pretend otherwise. “You’re my family. You’re mine.”

He wants so terribly for her to know the things in his heart, the deep well of love dug out inside his chest. The desire that’s so strong it frightens him, makes him feel out of control, wild. The need to do right by her— but also to protect her from himself. He wants to pull her into his arms and go back to that waterfall, somewhere nobody would ever find them. But he knows she’s bigger than that. Her destiny is bigger than that. She’s not his to tuck away and covet, though Gods know he wills it. Gods know, if he could sweep her hair back from her face every morning, kiss her throat every night, and lived wrapped up in her goodness, he’d never look back or want for anything more. He’d turn from the Seven Kingdoms without a second thought. He’d turn from everything. And that, he feels, is the true shame in their relationship. It has little to do with who she is to him blood-wise and everything to do with who he feels he could easily turn into.

Love is the bane of honor, the death of duty. What is honor compared to a woman’s love?

“And what of Sansa? Bran? Arya?” Dany says, her voice hardly more than a whisper. He meets her eyes, his thumbs still caressing her cheekbones. For a second, he remembers the way her eyes had looked last night: soft, searching, as vivid as a violet moonbloom flower. Now, he thinks they look guarded, cold— darker, the deep purple of Poison Kisses. “Are they not your family, too?”

Nothing about this situation is easy, and that question brings the pain to light. He won’t lie to her.

“They are. I grew up with them. They were the only family I knew as a child. And nothing can ever change that fact. You and I both know that.”

She doesn’t look away. He loves her for that, for the way her chin is still high, for the way she holds his gaze so that he might deliver whatever he has to say straight to her.

He leans forward in his chair. The old wood creaks loudly, filing the silence between them. When he drops his hands from her face, he’s surprised to see his own fingers trembling slightly, though the only thing filling his chest now is affection, love. Duty (to her, to them). He sets his palm on her lower stomach, their eyes still locked.

“They are my family. But not like you are.”

I choose you. I choose this. And then, again, this time aloud— so that she may fully know all the
things in his heart. He’s let them go unspoken for far too long.

“I choose you, Dany. Whatever that may mean. Whatever that may bring.”

She smiles slightly, but her eyes have grown glassy with tears.

“I didn’t want any of this. You know that, right? I never wanted to go against them. I wanted…” she trails off. “Well, it doesn’t matter now what I wanted.”

He reaches out and pulls her into his embrace, his heart aching, because he never wanted this, either.

“I know that,” he assures her.

Her words are muffled into his shoulder when she speaks next, but that does little to quell their power. “But this is the way things are. These are the decisions that Sansa has made. And I will quell any threat to us or to our child, and I’ll do it however I have to. So when you say you choose me— when you say I am yours— you need to truly understand what you’re choosing. I will do what I have to do, Jon. I won’t take pleasure in it, but I will do what needs to be done. I always have, and I always will.”

He knows that well. And he, too, must do whatever it takes to keep his family protected— this family here, he and Dany and their child. Perhaps he’d been wrong before; perhaps his love for her isn’t the death of his honor or his duty. Perhaps it’s just an allegiance to a different sort of duty, a different sort of honor. A different sort of love.

III.

Jon thought he trusted Tyrion, but when it comes time to finally sit down with him and Ser Davos and tell them of Dany’s pregnancy, he finds himself doubting the decision.

Like his love for Dany, he wants to keep this child a secret from the entire world. He learned the hard way that the only way to truly protect something is to keep it secret from outsiders. But they can’t keep anything secret anymore. In order to get their advisors’ most honest and useful guidance, they have to let them see the entire picture.

“A baby?” Tyrion finally says, surprised. He looks between the two of them. Jon can’t tell whether he’s pleased or not. “You’re certain?”

Jon thinks of the firm swell of her stomach, the way it feels beneath his hand. The growth he’s already witnessed.

“Yes,” he and Dany chorus.

Jon can feel Davos’s eyes on him. He almost expects some sort of quip from him about all his nights in Dany’s chambers, but he knows Davos is too honorable to say such things in front of the queen.

“How long?” Tyrion asks gravely. He takes a series of long drinks from the wine glass in his hand as if he can’t bear this conversation without it.

“Long enough that we’ve got to get the wedding planned and done,” Davos realizes, his eyes dancing down what he can see of Daenerys’s frame. “If we play things right, we may be able to have you two married in time to claim the babe was just born prematurely.”

“A wedding is always a good distraction,” Tyrion points out, “but I fear the current climate is inappropriate for it. The people are rebuilding; the last thing we should want to do is shove a grand
celebration in their faces.”

Ser Davos makes a troubled noise of agreement. Jon knows they’re right. If he were a commoner, nothing would turn him against the queen as quickly as seeing her celebrate her own private joy on the ashes of their city, their people.

“Then it won’t be a grand celebration,” Daenerys says. The three men look at her. “I have little interest in parties. We will have no grand feast for lords and ladies, no private ceremony. We will not spend gold on a wedding gown. We won’t drape this graveyard in flowers or jewels. We’ll be wed, yes, and the people will be witnesses, but let it be something for the people rather than something for us. A feast for everyone, small gifts for everyone. We frame this as a window into what our Targaryen rule will be: liberation for the people. Liberation from pain, poverty, disease, want. But not at the expense of the people. We won’t waste the gold we need for rebuilding what was destroyed on a wedding.”

Her words makes Jon’s heart soften and his mind churn with ideas.

“We could also use this same idea to help us with the North,” Jon adds, glancing over at Davos. “If we sent them the same gifts that we give the people here, that shows them that I’ve got them in mind, that they can still count on me to represent them, that they’re still considered part of this realm. That they can count on our queen to protect them and rule them with a fair, giving hand. And after the wedding, I can journey north to speak with the Northern lords. And try to talk with Sansa. Perhaps accompanied by you, Lord Tyrion: my sister usually accepts your counsel.”

Tyrion and Davos exchange a quick, unreadable look. Jon feels Dany’s hand— soft and small—grasp his beneath the table. He holds tightly to it.

“It's a nice idea. But what sort of feast or gifts will make the people here even momentarily forget about their children burning alive?” Tyrion asks.

Jon sees Dany flinch slightly from the corner of his eye. When he turns to look at her, her expression is cool.

“Nothing in this world could make a mother forget or forgive losing her children. Nothing ever could. But a mother does what she must for the children that remain. No matter the pain, no matter the anger. And if we take care of the rest of the children of this realm, if we protect them with everything that we have and sweeten their lives, those mothers will come to see us for what we are.”

Jon looks to Tyrion, waiting to see what he could possibly say to counter that. He is peering at Dany with something that almost looks like pity.

“You can’t rule through love and love alone, Your Grace,” Tyrion says. "Just as a mother can't raise her children with love and love alone.”

“Nor through fear and fear alone. Where I am betrayed, I will strike fear and strike it hard. But loyalty shall be met with love. This is our first opportunity to extend the hand. Those who have bent the knee will take the hand I’m offering, and I will lift them back up.”

Both Tyrion and Davos look at Jon, as if imploring him to say something to her. But she has only reminded him again why he had once bent his knee.

“I don’t have a better idea?” Jon demands of Tyrion. Daenerys’s idea is wonderful to Jon; it’s powerful, clever, good — he doesn’t understand why Tyrion seems so hesitant.

Tyrion glances at Davos, but Davos doesn’t say anything. He looks back at Jon. “I’ve got to think of
the gold,” he finally says. “We’ve yet to establish a Master of Coin so I’ve been fulfilling those duties, and it can’t have escaped your notice that we’ve got quite a monumental drain to our finances currently with the rebuilding. And while the idea of giving gifts to the people is a good one, Your Grace, it’s an expensive one.”

“It doesn’t need to be frivolous,” Jon counters. “The feast should be nice— something to lift spirits up— but not outlandish. The gifts can be small things, spices or soaps or fruit. Items that the people might not have access to right now, items that may bring them happiness. If we’ve got to do without for a while because of it, then so be it. I know our queen feels the same way.”

Jon looks to Dany, who nods. Tyrion still doesn’t look convinced.

“Ser Davos, what do you think?” Dany asks, clearly impatient with her own advisor’s hesitations.

Ser Davos is as honest and gruff as always. “Marriage is the obvious next step here. Especially now with the child. Do I think it will fix everything with the North? No. Certainly not. But I think it will help pull Sansa’s intentions into the light, and from there, we’ll be able to deal with the problem more readily. I do think we ought to give the financial concerns some careful consideration, but if we can find a way to make your idea work, Your Grace, I think it’s a wonderful way to lift the spirits and help the Targaryen image.”

“Then it’s settled,” Dany says, her tone ringing with finality, with authority. “We’ll send a raven north to every lord and lady, informing them of the engagement, and tonight we’ll begin planning what gifts we can afford to distribute.”

“Your Grace—” Tyrion’s objection is cut off.

“Do you have a better idea?” Daenerys asks, echoing Jon’s earlier question.

They wait. Tyrion’s expression sours.

“Not presently. But that doesn’t mean one doesn’t exist.”

“That’s precisely what it means. If it doesn’t exist to us now, when we need it, it doesn’t matter at all.” Dany stands; they all rise with her. “We’ll meet tonight.”

“If you’d like, Your Grace, I’ll begin sending ravens,” Davos offers.

Dany smiles at him. “Yes, thank you, Ser Davos.”

Davos catches Jon’s eye as he makes to follow after Dany. His question is silent but clear. Jon nods firmly. Yes, I do want this.

The idea fills him with equal parts fear and love.

IV.

Jon writes the letter that’s to be sent to Winterfell, knowing Sansa, Arya, and Bran need to hear about the upcoming marriage from him. He invites them down to King’s Landing for the wedding, wishes them well, and ends it with a warning. Queen Daenerys and I are soon to be wed. We all must learn to live together. There’s no more reason to fight: I’m not being deprived of my claim to the Throne; I never wanted it in the first place. You’re my siblings, and nothing will ever change that, but there will be no more passes for treason and no more blind eyes turned.

He wants to beg them to see reason, to overcome whatever prejudices they’ve developed that have
made them so disdainful towards ‘outsiders’. But he feels it’s a losing battle at this point.

Later, after helping Davos draft and send off the last of the ravens, Jon seeks out Dany so that they may take a walk through some of the areas of reconstruction. Jon likes to monitor the progress and see how everyone is coming together towards a common goal. He also likes to watch Dany interact with her people. Every day, he sees a little bit of that adoration and loyalty Missandei said the people of Essos had for Dany reflected in the faces of the smallfolk here. She wins more over each day through small acts of compassion, small moments of shared humanity. Like braiding a little Flea Bottom boy’s unkempt hair and infusing him with wonder with tales of the Dothraki men and their braids, or helping an elderly man shift through the rubble surrounding his home for a lost treasure. One day last week, she’d sat with an insecure, battle-scarred young girl and parted her silver hair, showing the girl her own wound from Cersei’s trap.

“We’re all a bit banged up, aren’t we?” she’d said, and the girl had smiled.

Jon likes being out there with her. He likes walking the destroyed roads, stopping to help wherever help can be given. He loves watching the way Dany lights up when she’s taking care of her people. They need her, of course: her guidance, her reassurances, her aid, her protection. But Jon realizes she needs them, too. She doesn’t rule the Seven Kingdoms simply because she feels she should or because she likes the power: she rules the Seven Kingdoms because she is, above all else, a rescuer. It’s in her blood. It’s in her heart. She needs their love as they need hers. She needs to protect them as much as they need protecting. There’s something magical in it; Jon can’t say he’s ever witnessed anything like it before. It fills him with pride; he wants to turn to the people and say, his voice tremulous with affection, that’s our queen.

With how much he enjoys those outings with her, he’s disappointed to find her chambers empty and her no where to be seen. He asks one of her handmaidens where she might be, and she’s only able to tell him that she’d last seen her in counsel with Lord Tyrion. Jon isn’t sure why that knowledge bothers him, but he’s left feeling impatient and unsettled. He heads straight for the room they were in earlier that day with Davos and Tyrion, but right as he’s about to enter, Dany makes to steps out. They nearly collide: Jon has to grasp her upper arms to steady her.

“Hello,” he greets, and then he takes in the dark storm of her eyes, the angry purse of her lips. His hands slip from her arms. “What’s wrong?”

She brushes past him without a word, leaving him looking into the room at Tyrion. Tyrion is still seated at the table nursing a glass of wine. He looks up at Jon. The look they share is tense; Jon finds his hand searching out the handle of Longclaw, his body reacting to the tension as if it were truly a threat. Perhaps it was. Jon doesn’t know. He only knows that something has happened in that room to upset his queen.

“Jon—”

Jon turns away from Tyrion and heads in the direction Dany had gone, not wanting to hear Tyrion’s excuses before he hears Dany’s reasons. He enters her chambers without so much a knock. He finds her standing at the small balcony, her hands gripping the railing, her back to him. He shuts the door firmly behind him and walks over to join her.

“What?” he asks softly. He reaches out and loops his arms around her waist, pulling her against the front of his body. “What’s happened? Is it Essos?”

Dany shakes her head. She’s stiff in his arms and he thinks she may pull away. That frightens him.

“The North?” Jon asks, though he can’t imagine what more could have happened between this morning and now.
“No. My Hand tells me it’s not in my best interest to rule with you. He tells me your allegiance lies with the Starks and the Starks only. He tells me this baby is a mistake—the marriage is a mistake—that us being together is a mistake—”

“And what does he know about us?” Jon interrupts. He can feel his heart growing cold, icing over: he suddenly wishes he’d pulled Longclaw out in that room, had told Tyrion to stay out of things that are theirs, his and Dany’s. The ferocity of that anger surprises him. “What does he know about me? Dany, what does he know about you?”

“He’s my Hand,” she says, still stiff in his arms. But she hasn’t pulled away yet.

“Yes. He’s your Hand. And if you don’t mind me saying, Your Grace, he hasn’t done a great job of it so far.”

She doesn’t scold him for that. He knows she recognizes that; she’s spoken with him about it on many occasions.

“He says, if you were truly loyal to me, you’d have Sansa arrested right now for what’s she’s done to me. To you. To us.”

That only serves to unbalance Jon even more. Since when is Tyrion advocating for Sansa’s punishment? Jon had always gotten the impression that Tyrion cares for Sansa.

“You and I talked about this,” Jon reminds Dany, working to keep his voice calm. He realizes now with the tightness of her posture and the way her fingers are curled tightly into her palm that she’s genuinely very panicked about this. “That will only give the rest of the North a reason to distrust you. A reason to want to rebel against you. Against us. We don’t want that.”

“Tyrion says that once we’re married, you’ll take over—you’ll be the reason for my downfall—you’ll betray me—your sisters will kill me—he said you must be part of Sansa’s plan.”

Jon turns to face her fully, reaching up to cradle her face in his hands. He studies her troubled eyes. His concern overtakes everything, but he can feel anger lurking just below. Anger at Tyrion. Why would he say things like that to Dany knowing she’d been so paranoid before that she wouldn’t even eat? What could he gain from making her uncertain again? What could he gain from pushing Dany and Jon apart?

“That’s rubbish, Dany,” he says fiercely. He leans in, his mouth pressing her full, soft lips. He kisses her gently, trying to articulate how tenderly he cares for her, how much he loves her. She kisses him back, but it’s not with the same inferno she usually does, and she’s the one to first break the kiss. Jon—still delicately cradling her face in his hands—says: “I don’t want the throne. I want you. I thought I made it clear who I chose.”

Her anguish is clear in her eyes now. They’re soft like a bruise. “Nothing is clear anymore.”

“We should be. That’s the only thing in this horrible city that has any truth to it. You and I are the only thing that feels...true.” It sounds lame and empty. But he can’t think of a better way to describe how he feels alive when he’s with her, how his blood turns to fire in his veins, how he feels like he belongs, like he’s loved. Like he’s someone worth being rather than just a bastard who’s never really known home or true family. “I know I’ve let you down, but I’m going to do right by you now. I love you. I couldn’t lie about that even if I wanted to. I love you.”

She appears to be looking for something in his gaze, though Jon’s not sure what. After a couple of moments, she reaches up, taking his face in her hands, too. Her palms are warm, soft: he can’t help
but step closer to her, bringing their bodies nearly flush.

“Never betray me,” she asks of him, her vulnerability peeking through once more. “And I will never betray you.” She appears soft, glowing— how many people in the world had ever seen Daenerys like this, Jon wonders. How many have gazed at her and seen the radiance of the moon rather than the flare of the sun? “Rule with me— and I’ll rule with you, too. Us, together.” She steps closer to him suddenly, pressing the front of her body to his, and Jon’s skin tingles in response. “Never leave me. And I’ll never leave you.”

Somehow, this moment feels as sacred as if they’re exchanging wedding vows in sight of the Old Gods. Jon can feel the urgency of her words, the sincerity. She’s brimming with it. He parts his lips to say never, never, but she moves her fingers over and presses them gently over his lips, stopping him.

“Not yet. I need you to think about it before you swear to me. I need you to mean it. If you’re not certain about me, about us, about any of this— go now. Go now, and I won’t try to make you stay. I swear to you I’ll bear you no ill harm if you choose to leave as long as you leave me be. But if you stay and betray me, Jon…” she trails off, her voice wavering. Her eyes grow wet with tears. He waits, expecting her to tell him I’ll burn you alive myself. She’d have every right to. He would deserve it. But she never finishes that sentence, and as he peers into her violet, tear-filled eyes, he realizes that she can’t bear to even threaten hurting him. Her anguish is a weight that settles on his shoulders; he realizes, all at once, that he could easily destroy her. That perhaps he’s the only person in the world who could.

He’s not sure what to say. What to do. He wants to take her anguish away, he wants her to know that he’ll never hurt her. He wants her to trust him.

“Dany, I—”

“Don’t,” she says again, her voice hardly above a whisper. She leans in close, her nose brushing the side of his, her lips agonizingly close. He feels her eyelashes brush his cheek as she closes her eyes; he closes his, too, and in the darkness, she’s the sweetest thing. Her heat, the smell of her hair, the softness of her skin. His heart expands and burns in his chest, filling every space. “Don’t. Not yet. Don’t answer me yet.”

But he’s ready to answer her now. He doesn’t need to think. He knows now that she is his duty, she holds his honor. She holds his love.

But he can’t refuse her this, can’t deny her what she needs. So he stops trying to speak. He kisses her again instead, softly and carefully, unsure if she wants him that close right now or not. Her responding kiss is equally soft, and for what feels like a blissful, never-ending moment in time, they stay together in that softness, their hands holding each other’s faces, bodies pressed together. Jon waits until she deepens the kiss, and then the quiet warmth quickly gives way to a roaring heat. He walks them backwards, pulling her with him, his lips never parting hers. He tastes her mouth, the remains of her fearful, unsure words, and he feels her hands begin to pull and push at his clothing. There’s a power to her now that’s not unlike the power he sees in her when she’s leading Drogon to battle, or addressing her armies, or giving an order. It’s an energy that’s always been magnetic to him, and never more than it is in times like these. He matches power with power, his fingers pulling deftly at the ties of her dress, his body pressing hers back against the bed. Their fumbling feels practiced and synchronized; he kicks his boots off as she’s pulling at his belt, and in only a few frantic moments, he’s yanking her dress down until it puddles at the floor, a pond of silver-blue satin soft beneath his feet. He covers her body with his, skin burning skin, his lips traveling down the length of her neck. He kisses her throat as her fingers dance up and down the skin of his back, and
he forgets how to feel or think about anything but this.

“I swear it,” he breathes. He moves his lips back to hers, whispering the words again into the heat of her mouth. “I swear it.”

When they lock eyes again, he feels so close to her that he’s halfway, madly convinced she can feel everything he feels, can hear every thought he thinks.

There’s no going back.
Thank you so much for the lovely comments and kudos! It means so much to know this story is helping some of you heal from S8. I hope you enjoy this chapter, and thanks again :)

I.

It’s the first time she’s woken up in someone’s arms in more years than she can bear to calculate.

For a moment, stuck in that shifting, hazy space between dreams and reality, she doesn’t trust it. The feeling of his arms, warm and solid around her, is as intangible and unattainable as the red door and the lemon tree. She must still be dreaming. She must be dead. She must never wake up.

It takes his arms tightening suddenly, drawing her in closer to his chest, to rouse her from that dark in-between place. Dany doesn’t know if he’s fully awake yet— if he’s drawn her closer with intent or if his body is acting of its own accord— but she falls into his embrace all the same, her face hiding against the scarred skin over his heart, her legs entwining with his. Her fingertips dance like flames over the smooth skin of his back, the strong muscles hidden beneath. She never wants to leave.

She thinks it may still be possible that he’ll pull away, that he’ll leave. That he’ll lean back and regard her with disgust over things she cannot control. That he’ll leave the bed colder than he found it, her heart more bruised than he found it. But she can’t do anything for that fear. She knows she must be brave in order to trust him again. She knows she must let go of the past— if I look back, I am lost—and trust the things he swore to her, both with heart and body. Trust the things he’d said, the things he’s done. That’s the only way forward.

When she feels him stretch his legs slightly— still twisted up with hers— and she hears him sigh as he wakes, she forgets to be afraid. Instead, her fear is doused with affection for him. With love. She doesn’t hug him close like she wants to, or lean her face up to kiss him good morning, but she can’t keep from softly kissing the jagged scar over his heart. His hand twists in her hair in response, catching tangles as he does so, and she feels warmth settle over her scalp like a heavy crown as he kisses her head, right above her healing wound.

Nothing said and yet she feels as if everything was. All at once, her fears dissipate, blown out like ashes in the wind. She hides her smile into his skin. As he wakes fully, he strokes her hair, her spine, her hip, his palms calloused and warm, heat dragging everywhere he touches like a kiss from flame. His lips press her scalp, her forehead, her shoulder. Her heart has never felt so light, so safe. She feels weightless, untouchable; cherished, loved. It’s the feeling she’s chased after her entire life. She wants to feel like this forever.

“Could we stay here a thousand years?” he asks, his voice soft and gruff with sleep. His hand presses her lower back, dragging her over on top of him as he rolls onto his back. Dany drapes over him, her ear over his heart, her lips still curved up in a smile she thinks may never sink from her face. Her loose hair drapes over them both like a blanket, and when both his arms wrap around her, she wishes madly— in inexplicably— that he could just pull her into him. That she could be buried here in this love, in him. In his embrace.
“It’s my kingdom. I suppose we could do what we like,” Dany answers, her words little more than a sigh.

“I suppose that’s true,” Jon murmurs back, and when he kisses her shoulder, she can feel his smile.

Neither of them mean it, of course—and yet they do. Daenerys is aware of her own responsibilities to this world and to her people, and yet, she feels a strange debt towards her heart. A responsibility to herself. She supposes it comes from a life of being the only one consistently looking out for herself. And she knows if she could somehow stop the world outside of this room, if she and Jon could stay here forever, she could be happy forever. She could feel like she’s home.

But she can’t stop time. She can’t erase the world outside of this bed, outside of these chambers. And that world is made up of people who need her, who will always need her. People she has a greater responsibility to than even herself.

“Though I think we may become bored eventually,” she says.

His arms tighten around her waist. “Doubt that. I doubt that very, very much.”

The dark, gravelly texture to his voice draws heat into her heart. She lifts her cheek from his chest and looks up at him, a soft smile still in place. His smile is so bright and genuine that his eyes have crinkled up in the corners; Dany stretches an arm up and lightly strokes his cheek, her own smile growing.

“I’m glad you stayed,” she tells him.

He cups her face in his hands, his eyes lovely, dark, and deep. Dany thinks she could study them for hours on end and still never fully appreciate the depth of them. Her eyes trace the scar over his left eye as her hand seeks out the scar over his heart. She sets her hand over it lightly, overcome with something she can’t name at the pounding of his heartbeat echoing below it. Something fierce and powerful that fills her entire frame—something that makes her lean in and capture his lips with hers.

For a brief second, she fears she’s acting out of turn. But his response is one of forthright intensity. She hears the iron bed frame groan as he flips them over, his body looming over hers completely (here, too, with his body blocking out the sunlight from the half-open window, it is lovely, dark, and deep), his kiss burning straight through her. She drags her hands through his hair, draws him close with her legs, meets his intensity with intensity, his heat with heat. Fire with fire. She knows they’ll be consumed by it, and she craves that pyre like she’s always craved home.

He’s clutching her so tightly, loving her so fiercely, that she can’t process it when he suddenly breaks his lips from hers and freezes. She trembles in his arms, her eyes searching his face, confused. He meets her eyes and jerks his head towards the door. Dany peeks underneath his arm and glances towards it. It’s closed, but she sees two spots of blocked light where two feet must be. And then she hears what Jon must’ve heard the first time: a knock.

“Your Grace?” Ser Davos calls. “Please forgive the early hour—I was looking for one of your advisors, Lord Snow, I believe you know of him.”

Dany presses her lips together against a smile as a scowl spreads over Jon’s face. He disentangles himself from her and rolls over onto his back. “He thinks he’s quite funny, doesn’t he?”

“And he is,” Dany counters, amused. She props up on her elbows and elevates her voice. “What need do you have of him, Ser Davos?

“I have a need of both of you, Your Grace. Jon’s received another raven from Winterfell, and we’ve
received a response from three other Northern houses. You both asked that I let you know as soon as they arrived.”

Dany waits for the sickening dread that lay heavy in her stomach all day yesterday to set in once more. She waits for her nausea to return and her heart to ache as it did yesterday at any mention of Winterfell. Any mention of the Starks.

But Jon’s pulled her over so she’s draped over his chest, his arms secure around her, his chin resting against her hair. Her eyes flutter shut; a breath of relief slips from her lips.

“We’ll meet in the council room in a half-hour,” Jon calls.

There’s a short, comical pause. “Oh, there you are, Jon.”

“Goodbye, Ser Davos,” Jon says flatly.

Dany can hear him chuckling as he walks off. She smiles again.

“I think I’m growing fond of him,” she admits.

“He’s the only man here I don’t question the loyalty of,” Jon agrees.

Dany looks up and meets his eyes.

“The only one?” she echoes. “Not Grey Worm?”

Jon pulls his fingers through her hair absently, his gaze studying hers. He is taking her question seriously.

“I don’t believe Grey Worm trusts me. It’s difficult to trust someone who doesn’t trust you.”

Dany winces as his fingers catch on a tangle too-near her wound. He withdraws his fingers at once, his hand going to her hip instead.

“Grey Worm doesn’t trust many people. But when that trust is gained, it never wavers. His loyalty never fails.”

She knows, without a doubt, that there is nothing in this world she could do to earn Grey Worm’s betrayal. He would stand by her, stalwart and true, through anything and everything. She can’t help but think he would do the same for Jon if only he saw him as Dany saw him.

“I wouldn’t go North if he wasn’t here,” Jon admits. “If there’s one thing I do trust, it’s Grey Worm’s loyalty to you.”

This time, the mention of the North does weigh on her heart. Because it’s a reminder that Jon’s going to be leaving her. Logically, she knows it’s what has to be done. She knows it’s the only way to overcome their Northern hurdles. But she’s afraid. She’s only just found home here with him— the thing she’s been chasing after even longer than she’s been chasing her father’s throne. And as soon as she has it, as soon as they are man and wife, queen and king, he’ll leave. Perhaps only for a month, perhaps two, but to her, that’s a vast sea of time. A huge gap between them where anything could happen. She could lose her baby; she could be betrayed again; she could fail.

She could be lonely.

When had loneliness become such a heavy weight? She can still remember vividly the way it drowned her after Missandei died, in those weeks where no one came, no one cared. It smothered
her (a pillow to the face of an empty shell of her). She’s afraid to feel like that again.

But she has no one else here but Jon. He’s her family, her safety. What remains when he goes? Grey Worm, yes, but the affection and closeness they share is different.

Tyrion?

Not for the first time, Dany thinks of him with anger and resentment.

“And Tyrion?” she asks Jon.

Going by the tightness of Jon’s jaw, he feels similar feelings towards Tyrion currently.

“I thought I trusted him,” he admits.

“Thought.”

“I don’t know what I think now.”

Dany thinks it’s fairly obvious what he thinks by the sharp edge to his eyes, the momentary clench of his fists. Looking at him as that wave of anger passes over him, she thinks she can see a wolf in his eyes. It’s different from the dragon she saw in Viserys’s, the rage that struck quick and fast, fire and blood. This is steadier, feral. An anger that promises to fester. A fierceness that must last until winter comes.

But she’s not frightened of the wolf. She rests her head back on his chest and closes her eyes, content when his hand goes back to caressing her hip.

“What do you think?” he asks suddenly.

She keeps her eyes closed. “About Tyrion?”

“Yes. About whether we can trust him.”

She wants to say he’s my Hand, of course I trust him. But her trust had been bruised long ago, and things just kept adding to that. Between the constant missteps in his counsel, his constant underestimations of a sister he should have known better than anyone else, his absence when she needed his reassurance the most following Missandei’s death, and his recent, unexplained distrust of Jon, she’s leaning towards no.

“I think he wanted me to feel alone again. He wanted to push us apart. And I can’t see why he would do those things if he had my best intentions in mind.”

“It’s possible he’s loyal to you—just not to me.”

“No. That’s not loyalty. Making somebody feel frightened, alone, betrayed…that’s not loyalty.” Missandei would have never done that. “I don’t know why he said those things. Maybe he really thinks them. Maybe he really believes you’re going to betray me.”

“My queen? My family?” There’s a short pause. His hand presses against her hip, hugging her closer to his side. “The mother of my child? If he believes that, he’s not as clever as they make him out to be. If he believes that, he doesn’t know me at all.”

“He knows your sister and what she’s capable of. And he knows your birth-name,” she reminds Jon. She looks up at him. “Power can change people.”
He frowns. “No. Power doesn’t change people. Power only brings your true intentions to light.”

She thinks about those words long after they’ve left his mouth. She reaches up and sets her fingers against his lips, tracing the curve of them softly, her heart large enough to fill her entire chest. For a time, they’re quiet, her fingers tracing his face, his lovely gaze entangled with hers.

“And what are your intentions, Jon Snow?” she asks lightly.

His smile is faint, but it warms Dany all the same. “I’d like to think my intentions are pretty obvious after last night.”

“You say power brings our true intentions to light. What will you bring to light when when marry? When you’re the most powerful man in Westeros? What will you do with that power?”

She knows her answer. It comes to her mind at once, though it’s not the answer she would have admitted had anybody asked her that question. Make a home, she thinks, in the place of ‘break the wheel’. Or maybe it simply grows up beside it, both goals opposite sides of the same coin.

She thinks Jon will need time to think about that question, but he doesn’t. It’s immediate for him, too.

“Protect you,” he says. He slips his hand over her hip, letting it rest on the gentle slope of her lower stomach. “Protect her.” She closes her eyes as his thumb strokes over her skin. “And protect the people.”

“Our people,” she corrects automatically. She thinks of the way she feels walking the streets of Flea Bottom, Jon by her side. The way the smallfolk smile at them. Part of her had always wondered if marrying would make her power weaker— as if it was split in half, leaving her with only a portion of what she’d once had— but with Jon, she doesn’t think it feels like that at all. Instead, it feels as if their power doubles together, multiplies. His is added with hers, rather than taking from it.

“All right— our people.”

Those are his opposite sides of the same coin: protecting her and their baby, and protecting their people. When she meets his eyes again, she knows he’s aware of that, too. Their dualities rest together, fit together. As do they.

His eyes dance between her gaze and her lips. It’s a familiar dance.

“Ser Davos is waiting,” she reminds him softly.

“The Others take Ser Davos,” he dismisses, and Dany laughs. But they part ways to ready for the day despite.

II.

Her Hand is the only person in the council room when she walks in. Dany stands in the doorway and coolly studies the crystal goblet in front of him.

“Being drunk by midday certainly won’t make your counsel any more useful to me than it has been this past year.”

He raises his eyebrows as he lifts the goblet up. Dany watches him take a deep sip, both his hands gripping the cup tightly as if it contains some magical, priceless elixir, instead of what smells to Dany like stale Dornish wine. The smell turns her stomach.
“Well how will we truly know unless we try?” he finally says dryly.

She works to keep her expression measured. She steps further into the room, walking over to Tyrion.

“You are Hand of the Queen,” she reminds him. “You would do well to act as such, lest you desire I give that position to someone else.”

She comes to a stop by his chair. He doesn’t look up to meet her eyes. He stares down at the ruby contents of the goblet as if there’s some truth to be found at the bottom of it.

“Perhaps you should,” he finally tells her, and Dany feels a thrill of anger and hurt pierce through her chest, though she doesn’t show it. She raises her eyebrows the tiniest bit, waiting for more. He finally turns and looks up at her, and in his eyes, she sees that he’s wounded. “Perhaps you should ask Jon Snow. It’s his counsel you take above all others, after all.”

Were it not for the clear conflict in his eyes, Dany thinks she might have met those words with rage. But she knows what pain looks like in the eyes. And even if it doesn’t excuse his recent behavior, she can’t cast it from her mind entirely. She sinks down into the seat beside his and reaches out, grasping the stem of the goblet. Tyrion’s hands flex on the crystal as she pulls it from his grasp. She wants the wine no where near her— nausea is gripping her stomach now— but she wants it no where near him, either. It does nobody any good for Tyrion to sink into Cersei’s ways, least of all Dany.

She sets it to her other side, far from Tyrion. For a second, she thinks he’s going to argue with her. She thinks he’s going to meet that silent order with rebellion. But his hands close into fists and he looks away.

“I love Jon Snow,” she tells him firmly. “And he loves me. It isn’t a matter of discussion. It isn’t a matter of political debate.”

Tyrion reaches up to rub over his eyes. “Love and passion have no place in politics. No place in ruling. It’s a dangerous mix— it always has been.”

“And wasn’t it you who convinced me to separate from Daario so that I may marry, so that I may make alliances?” she reminds him.

“Yes. Marriage— yes. Alliances— yes.” He turns to face her. “This is different. This is different— and you know it. You’re far from stupid, Your Grace. It’s one of the reasons I respect you so much. One of the reasons I chose you. One of the reasons I still choose you.” His eyes become earnest. “I know I’ve led you astray in the past. I only wish my counsel had been better. I suppose it’s true that I have a lot left to learn. But when I tell you this is a dangerous idea…isn’t it my job to counsel you against things that might ruin you?”

He’s as fervent as he’d been yesterday. It’s his urgency that unsettled her before, and had she not talked with Jon last night, it’s his urgency that would have set her into a panic again today. She knows, without a doubt, that he sincerely believes what he says. He sincerely believes Jon will ruin her.

But he doesn’t know what Dany knows. He doesn’t know what her and Jon are— he doesn’t know of the soft way Jon holds her face in his hands, his touch reverent and gentle as if he believes he’s holding the world. He doesn’t know of the warmth that floods Dany’s entire body when she’s with Jon, as if she’s stepped into the heated entryway of home. He doesn’t know of the belonging she feels when she’s with Jon. Blood of her blood. He doesn’t know of the fierce love that sparks within
her at the sight of Jon’s smile.

“Your job is to counsel my political decisions. Your job is not to counsel my heart.”

His urgency only grows. He pulls on the edge of the table, dragging his chair closer to Dany’s, desperate for her to hear him out.

“And yet you’ve brought your heart into your political decisions,” he argues. “Worse— you’ve let it rule those decisions. You won’t even consider any alternatives—”

“What alternatives?!” Dany demands, her anger peeking through for the first time. “You’ve offered me no other alternatives! As far as I can see, it’s marriage or it’s war— and I will not put my armies through another war, I won’t put my people through another war—”

“There’s going to be a war, there’s no avoiding a war, the question is only how far you will fall before it, how much you’ll let yourself be hurt—”

“You will not interrupt me!”

Her words ring sharply around the room, as cold and hard as a slap. She is brimming with the rage she’d denied herself at the beginning of the conversation. Her heart pounds in her chest.

“As you’ve already said, I am not stupid, Lord Tyrion. Don’t presume to think for a moment that I don’t know of all the conversations you and Varys had about me. Perhaps, as two prominent members of my small council, you had a right to discuss my choices. But how often were those discussions had with me rather than about me? How many times did you speak of me as if I’m some pawn in your game— a piece you’ve got to figure out how to manipulate one way or another— rather than speaking to me and asking what I think, what I want—”

“Am I not doing that now? Is that not what we’re doing now?” Tyrion demands.

Dany stands. “I already said I will not be interrupted!”

Tyrion holds her fierce gaze. Dany sets a hand on her stomach, her nausea growing to a distracting level, but she won’t back down.

“For better or for worse, Your Grace, and no matter what the consequences may be, a Hand’s job is to say the things a queen might not want to hear,” Tyrion says, his voice grave. “You can’t trust any counsel if it’s not honest. I won’t disrespect you by lying to you. I know that Jon Snow will betray you. I was told by someone who sees all truth, someone who can’t lie. And I am asking you— I am begging you— to stop what has been started. To step back. Send him back to the North. We can meet whatever the North sends our way— they have hardly any men, the Army of the Dead severely compromised their land, they won’t be a difficult enemy to conquer.”

His eyes go from hers to her hand, still set over her stomach as she struggles to push through her sickness.

“The child complicates things, but there’s little to be done about that now. If our armies deal with the Northern problem quickly, the child won’t be used as a pawn, and we can get past this hurdle.”

She looks away from him. The swell of nausea that rises then comes from more than just the smell of that stale wine. She is sick at the way he speaks of her child. As if she’s a mistake, a problem. A “hurdle”. Dany has lost Rhaego, Viserion, Rhaegal, and maybe even Drogon. She doesn’t know where he is— for all she knows, something has happened to him, too. Every life she’s reared has disappeared from her. Every life she’s nurtured with her own, with her love, with her dreams. Every
child she’s given entire pieces of her heart to. She thinks Tyrion must be a fool to think she’d ever think of this baby as anything but what she is: a miracle. A blessing. Something Dany never thought she’d ever have. Her family. And Jon gave her that.

“My child is not a hurdle,” she spits. She’s so angry her body begins to tremble. It takes every bit of her strength to repress it. “Jon Snow is not a ‘Northern problem’. He’s the father of my child. He’s your king.”

Tyrion shakes his head. “No. He’s not. I might have endorsed that one day— I’ve certainly always thought highly of the man— but not knowing what I know now. I won’t endorse someone who will destroy you. My loyalty lies with you. If I must be executed for that loyalty, well. I only ask that you return my wine to me beforehand.”

Dany turns around so her back is to him. She can’t bear to look at him any longer. She closes her eyes and asks her next question, her words stiff. “Who told you that Jon is going to betray me? You say you’re certain of it. Who made you so certain?”

A pause, and then: “Bran Stark.”

Dany spins around to face Tyrion, incredulous.

“Bran Stark? And has it occurred to you, Lord Tyrion, that Bran Stark may be trying to get me to turn against Jon? To push him away— so that he and his sister may convince Jon to work against me, to take the throne?”

“It might have. If I hadn’t had many conversations with Bran while we were at Winterfell. If I didn’t know what he is now. He can’t lie. He’s not Bran Stark anymore, not really. He’s the Three-Eyed Raven. You heard what he said before the battle— he is the keeper of the history of men. The entire history, beginning and end. Of all of us. Of you, Your Grace. I won’t just sit by knowing what I know now and watch you walk to the gallows.”

“Meaning what?” Dany asks. “You’ll go against what I order? You’ll go against my rule?”

He meets her gaze, but Dany sees fear shining in his eyes. He pushes on despite it; his words sound sad. “I will go against anything that threatens you. Even if it’s yourself.”

Dany is infuriated by the condescension, by the notion that he— and only he— knows what’s best for her, that if he must commit treason against her, it will somehow be for her simply because he thinks it, he wills it.

“Again you are taking counsel with others about me, rather than speaking to me,” Dany says. She’s surprised at how calm her own voice sounds. She doesn’t feel calm. She’s full of anger and frustration as violent as a firestorm. “You haven’t once asked me what I know of Jon. You haven’t once asked me if I trust him.”

“What does that matter? If he’s doomed to betray you— doomed to be your downfall?” Tyrion begs. “What does your current view of him matter?”

“My current view of him is the only valid view,” she spits. “I am the one who knows him, who is with him, the one who shares a bed with him—”

“Meaning nothing—”

“If you interrupt me one more time, you will never have the chance to interrupt anyone ever again! I am your queen and you’ve taken counsel from those who conspire against me, and now you are
conspiring against me. Jon Snow is not going to betray me. I don’t know what Bran Stark is angling towards— I don’t know what kind of games he is playing, what sort of games he’s pulled you into playing— but I don’t trust him, and I don’t believe in him. I don’t care what he calls himself. I am not fool enough to deny that greater knowledge and power exists in this world, but I won’t take a man for a god. I will continue on as I always have: believing in myself. And I know what I see in Jon. You are trying to confuse me, you’re trying to frighten me, you’re trying to strand me here with no one— why shouldn’t I think you’re in on whatever game Bran Stark is playing? Whatever game Sansa is playing?”

Tyrion pushes the chair back from the table and stands. He walks up to Dany, and when he takes her hand, she considers snatching it away.

“Do you hear yourself?” he asks her, his voice soft. “Nothing but paranoia could make you believe that. I’m trying to help you. You don’t want to see it because you love him. And you believe that he loves you. And maybe he does…Gods know I’ve loved people I’ve ended up killing. It’s not safe— this relationship with him. It’s unstable. It won’t last. Don’t forget that it was the person your father trusted most that killed him.”

She wants to look away, but she won’t give him that satisfaction. She holds his gaze, hers steady and blazing, her jaw set. “I haven’t. And I also haven’t forgotten that it was a Lannister.”

She might have slapped him for how he flinches. It takes him a moment to regain composure.

“I’m not my brother any more than you are your father, Your Grace,” he tells her, and somehow, it sounds like a threat to Dany’s ears. She can feel rage boiling in her chest, wild and hot. She has to breathe through it before she does something she’ll regret. She has to remind herself of all the things she stands to lose if she lashes out without thinking.

“Then tell me why I suddenly feel the need to walk behind you rather than in front of you, lest I lose sight of my back?” she spits.

It’s only the sound of heavy, approaching footsteps that keeps things from escalating. Dany’s got half a mind to execute him now her rage and betrayal is so great (her fear). Even as Jon and Ser Davos enter the room, she doesn’t tear her gaze from Tyrion’s, nor his from hers. Awkwardness settles over them all.

“Is everything okay?” Ser Davos asks.

Dany answers with her eyes still on Tyrion’s. “Jon and I will speak alone.”

Ser Davos raises his brow, but he turns at once and walks from the room. Tyrion hesitates so long that Dany thinks he’s going to disobey her order.

“The queen told you to leave,” Jon says.

“I heard the bloody queen,” Tyrion mutters darkly. Dany watches him walk from the room, her posture rigid with anger, her hands gripping the back of a chair so tightly her knuckles are white. As soon as Tyrion shuts the door behind him, she closes her eyes. In the silence that falls over the room, those dark whispers from before begin twisting through her thoughts. They frighten her.

The sound of Jon’s approaching footsteps sounds faraway. Daenerys can hear her own heartbeat. She feels the front of his body press against the back of hers; he reaches around her, sets his hands atop hers where they’re gripping that chair to the point of pain. She relaxes her grip at once.

“What’s happened? What did he say?”
Dany breathes through her anger, her confusion. Her pain. Jon pulls her hands from the chair and gently tugs her back against him, his arms wrapping around her waist. Her eyes remain closed as he rests his cheek against her hair. She can feel his heartbeat against her back, the warmth of his arms through the material of her dress, the strong shape of his body against hers. She wants the physical sensations to ground her, but they don’t stop the whispering.

“Tell me again,” she asks of him.

She doesn’t know if he’ll even know what she’s asking for. What she needs. In some strange way that doesn’t make much sense to her, she feels as if she’s giving him some sort of final test. She can’t say whether or not it’s fair.

He rests his chin against her shoulder. His words are soft—a whisper of their own. “I swear it.”

It’s louder than the rest. She believes it above all else. How could she not? She had found in his arms the thing she’d been searching for for as long as she could search for anything, could want for anything. How could she doubt that?

She tells him everything Tyrion told her as they stand there together. He listens and doesn’t interrupt, doesn’t ask anything. His words are strained with withheld anger when she finishes.

“I have to go talk to them, Dany. As soon as possible. Sooner than I thought.”

She twists in his arms so she’s facing him. She looks up at him, her hands rising to cup his face. His beard is rough against her palms. She can’t help but be honest.

“I don’t want you to leave,” she says quietly.

“I don’t want to leave,” he tells her, his eyes pouring into hers. “But I can’t have this. I can’t have my siblings saying these things, telling these lies, conspiring against us in this way. I don’t understand what they’re trying to do or why they’re trying to do it, but they’re my family, and it’s my duty to set them right.”

She allows herself one moment of weakness. One moment to be Dany, not Queen Daenerys, not even Daenerys Stormborn. Just Dany. “It’s your duty to be here. To stay here with me.”

She sees the conflict in his eyes. He reaches up to cradle her face, too. Dany leans into his touch.

“What else can I do?” The question is genuine. Dany wishes she had an answer.

“I don’t know,” she admits. “And I don’t know what to do about Tyrion.”

“If he conspires against you, he’ll be arrested. He doesn’t have to like me, but he has to follow your wishes. He’s bordering on treason.”

“I think he really believes what he told me,” Dany admits.

“Then he’s a fool. And he won’t be staying here when I go North. He’s coming with me—either voluntarily or as a prisoner, if you will it.”

Daenerys doesn’t particularly want Tyrion with Jon anymore than he wants Tyrion there with her. Jon must read that in her expression.

“His confusion stems from Bran. I’ll take him with me to go confront Bran. I’ll talk to Tyrion, I’ll set him right. I’ll get Bran to admit he lied, I’ll figure out what Bran is trying to achieve. I’ll fix this. But
only if you will it. Tell me what you want, Dany. Tell me what you want, and I’ll give it to you.”

She wants so many things so much that she feels she could burst open from the intensity of it all. She doesn’t even know where to start. She wants him. She wants home. She wants safety for her people. She wants Drogon. She wants the wars to stop, the fighting to stop. She wants loyalty. She wants Missandei. She wants back what she’s lost: Rhaego, Drogo, Irri, Ser Barristan, Viserion, Ser Jorah, Rhaegal. Sometimes, stupidly, though she loathes to admit to herself, she even wants Viserys.

“I want everything. I want you.”

His smile is sad. “I only know how to give you one of those things.”

He doesn’t understand.

“If I have you, I have everything.”

Softness passes over his eyes. He pulls her closer in response, kisses her, holds her. And she knows they’re not safe. She knows they’ve got a long road ahead of them, many enemies to conquer, many hurdles to overcome. But for a moment— just a moment— she feels safe and loved.

III.

After all she’d heard from Tyrion that morning, the letters Ser Davos has— the letters they’d met to discuss in the first place— hardly faze her.

“’House Hornwood swears fealty to Jon Snow and the Dragon Queen’,” Ser Davos reads. He sets the letter down on the stack to his right. “Hornwood joins what remains of House Flint, House Tallhart, and House Cerwyn.” Ser Davos picks up another letter. “Queen Yara of the Iron Islands states her intent to come here to offer her congratulations in person. The Martells wish to provide wine for the celebrations as their gift to you both.”

“I don’t think the commonfolk will turn down Dornish wine,” Jon comments.

“Aye, I think they’ll be kissing your feet before the night is over,” Ser Davos agrees. He reaches for the letter Dany’s been staring at for nearly all the time they’ve been sat here: the letter from Winterfell. She knows Jon doesn’t know what it says yet, and she’s anticipating the worst. “Is Lord Tyrion going to join us?”

Daenerys hadn’t seen Tyrion since she sent him away that morning. After she and Jon spoke, they’d eaten what little Dany could stomach, and then they’d sought out Ser Davos so they could address the ravens that had come. But Dany hadn’t sent for Tyrion.

“What word has come from Winterfell?” Dany asks, ignoring his previous question.

Ser Davos unrolls the scroll. His eyes scan the words ahead of time; Dany sees a line form between his eyebrows.

“Well?” Daenerys asks, unable to take his steely silence.

He clears his throat gruffly. “’A King Consort is no King.’”

Dany knows there are many layers to what Sansa has written, but the overall meaning is clear: to Sansa, Jon marrying Daenerys isn’t good enough. But she hadn’t been fool enough to ever think it would be.
“Well,” Dany says, breaking the tense silence of the room. She pushes back from the table. “That makes things clear.”

Jon catches her hand as she rises.

“It doesn’t matter what Sansa thinks. No other Northern House has turned against you yet. Any bannermen she may have are breakaways from their Houses, from their allegiances. She can’t have many at all— certainly not enough to threaten you. She won’t get more now that the other Northern lords are accepting our union. We continue on with our wedding as planned, and after, I will fix this.”

“How? How will you fix this?” Dany demands.

“However I have to.”

“Even if I want her executed?”

His hand tightens around hers. “If that’s what it comes to, I’ll swing the sword myself.”

Those words make her feel ill. “I wouldn’t ask it of you.”

“I would ask it of myself. Of Ned Stark’s son.”

She stares down at him, chest filled with hurt on his behalf. “You’re Rheagar’s son,” she says.

“Perhaps in blood. But my honor is that of Ned Stark, and the man who passes the sentence should swing the sword,” he answers.

“Let’s hope it doesn’t come to that,” Ser Davos says firmly. “With her support from other Houses cut off, Sansa will be forced to back down. Jon should have no trouble talking sense into her. If she agrees to back down—if she agrees to bend the knee—what do you will for her, Your Grace?”

Dany holds tighter to Jon’s hand. “If she bends the knee, I’ll pardon her. But she should have no position of power, no titles. Warden of the North will pass to whoever Jon chooses, and Winterfell passes to Arya Stark, should she choose to bend the knee.”


Dany hardly trusts Arya any more than the other Starks, but she absolutely doesn’t trust Bran. And she knows Arya has a special place in Jon’s heart; she had been a true sister to him growing up despite all odds. Loyalty, Daenerys believes, should be rewarded above all else.

“Arya of House Stark or no Stark.”

If either of them disagree with that, it doesn’t show.

IV.

She doesn’t see Tyrion again until the day of the wedding.

When he finally seeks her out, she has half a mind to arrest him on sight. She had thought for certain he’d fled North. But he looks as if he’s been sulking about in brothels, and the stench of alcohol is so prominent that it nearly makes Dany gag.

“I should arrest you where you stand,” Dany greets coldly.
She’s having her wound dressed by the maester so she doesn’t turn her head to follow his movements as he enters the room, but she makes eye contact with Grey Worm, who’s stationed by the door. He follows Tyrion’s every movement for her.

“Perhaps you should. I think that’s probably what I would advise you to do, were it somebody else who spoke to you the way that I did,” Tyrion says.

“I don’t need any more reasons to do it. I’ve got plenty of those of my own. Give me a reason I shouldn’t,” Dany says.

“My only reason you shouldn’t is the same reason I said what I said. I am loyal to you. I am loyal to my queen. That’s all I have to say for myself.”

“And it’s not enough. If you were truly loyal to me, you would trust my judgement and you would follow my orders.”

The maester presses a thick, pliable salve deep into her wound with no warning; she feels the pain shoot down her body, echoing so deep she feels it in her knees. She hisses in pain.

“My apologies, Your Grace,” the maester murmurs. He presses down on her wound again with his thumb. Dany feels as if the salve is splitting her head open. She thinks she may be sick from the pain. She breathes shallowly through her mouth, her eyes closing. “There.”

She senses Tyrion approaching, though she’s not sure how.

“It looks better,” Tyrion comments. Dany doesn’t answer. She still hasn’t decided what she wants to do with him. She feels his hand touch her arm suddenly— she wrenches back so quickly she accidentally causes the maester to dig his nail into her wound. Her cry of pain is involuntary.

“Forgive me, Your Grace, forgive me,” the maester says, horrified.

“It was my fault,” Dany tells him, her eyes streaming from the pain. It only makes her more irritated with Tyrion. “I don’t have anything to say to you. I advise you to take your leave before I decide to execute you.”

Tyrion holds his hands out emptily. “And where should I go?”

“North. To your Starks.”

“You insult me, Your Grace,” Tyrion says, wounded.

“Then I have only given back what you’ve given me.”

“That wasn’t my intention.”

“What was your intention?” Dany demands. The seamstress enters then, and behind her, Ser Davos and one of Dany’s only trusted handmaidens. Davos is holding what’s meant to be her crown: a vision of silver, three dragons twisted together, fragile yet fierce. But she knows she won’t be able to wear it. “Because if your intention was to turn me against Jon Snow, surely you realize it’s fallen flat. I am marrying him, and nothing you say will change my mind.”

“I know,” Tyrion says, and his voice cracks. Dany would feel bad for him if he hadn’t caused her incalculable stress. “That’s why I’m here.”

“I don’t trust you,” Daenerys tells him. She feels Ser Davos watching them with a frown, but she
doesn’t have time to fill him in on anything. “I may never trust you again.”

“As is your right. Do I have the right to regain your trust? To earn it back?”

“I don’t—no, don’t,” Dany says, the latter part in Dothraki, turning her focus to her handmaiden Ezhi. Ezhi freezes, Daenerys’s crown nearly touching her hair. “I can’t. It hurts too much,” Dany explains to her.

“Try again, Your Grace,” the maester implores her. “This salve has more willow bark and triple the oil of rosemary.”

It doesn’t matter. Dany can tell from the deep throbbing in her head. Ser Davos felt it was important that Dany wore a crown during the wedding ceremony, but she’d known from the moment it’d laid heavily on her head that she couldn’t. It was almost funny: she’d won her crown, but because of the injury sustained during that victory, she couldn’t even wear it.

She allows Ezhi to rest the crown gently on her head again. She’s able to grit her teeth and bear it—as long as she doesn’t move. But the moment she turns her head, it moves against her wound, and pain shoots down to her shoulder. Ezhi reads her pain and lifts it at once.

“It’s not worth it,” Daenerys tells Ser Davos.

“It would be good to wear it,” Tyrion says.

Dany looks at him, annoyed. “It’s not worth it,” she repeats firmly. “I don’t want to be in pain during my wedding.” She turns to Ezhi. “You may take it back,” she says in Dothraki. Ezhi nods.

She doesn’t add it, doesn’t say it out loud, but in a way, she thinks it’s almost fitting that she’s too damaged to wear the crown. Her city and her people are damaged, after all, in many ways because of her. She would wear a crown when all the damage she had caused was repaired. That, and only that, would be her coronation.

Tyrion, for someone who was so against Dany’s union with Jon, certainly has many opinions about the wedding itself. Dany lets him chatter on with Ser Davos, an odd mood taking over her as she does. Her previous anger gives way to indifference. Let him think what he thinks. Let him say what he says, Dany thinks. I know Jon. And tonight, I’ll be his wife, and he’ll be my husband, and none of this will matter at all. We will deal with whatever comes together. Tyrion is right: where would he go if I cast him away? His power comes from me and me alone.

When Ezhi returns, Ser Davos and Tyrion leave so that Dany can dress. Grey Worm steps out, but he remains just outside the closed door. Dany can tell he is uneasy about the wedding, uneasy about the union. The difference between his uneasiness and Tyrion’s is that Grey Worm still trusts in her decisions.

The seamstress— a Flea Bottom woman she and Jon had met on one of their first walks through the destruction— holds Dany’s dress up for her to see. It’s a simple thing, like Dany wanted. Silverwhite, flowing in the places it needs to be flowing to hide her small bump, free from any embellishments or adornments. They provided the woman with the fabric and paid her well for her services, something that seemed to bring her insurmountable pride and joy.

The seamstress, Annet, is smiling as Ezhi helps Dany into the dress, her face bright and radiant. It brings Dany hope. Her marriage hasn’t wrung much joy from the hearts of any of her advisors, and even she and Jon haven’t been able to regard it as much more than a necessary next step. But Dany realizes from this woman’s joy that the common people— at least some of them, anyway— are
celebrating it. They’re celebrating their queen and soon-to-be king. They’re supporting them.

Dany knows what it’s like to rule with support from small folk only: that isn’t new to her. If anything, it makes her feel more at home, more at ease. If she has the love of her people, she can withstand anything from the lords and ladies.

She’s led to a tall looking glass. She makes sure she looks appropriately thin before all else, to ensure her pregnancy remains a secret, and then she allows herself to take in the rest of her appearance. She’s certainly looked better: her wound is more swollen than usual thanks to how much it’s been poked and prodded, and because of it, it’s slightly noticeable even through her intricate braids. A lack of sleep highlights the purple of her eyes, and not in an all-together attractive way. She supposes she and Jon should have made more of an effort to sleep the night prior. Her face still hasn’t filled back in completely from all that time she went without food, leaving her profile sharper than she liked it.

But her dress warms her heart. She can tell every stitch was made with love, with honor. It’s elegant in its simplicity, special in its informality. She truly loves it, and when she turns to smile at Annet, she sees tears shining in the woman’s dark eyes.

“I am indebted to you and your skill,” she tells the woman kindly.

“Young beauty makes it shine,” Annet tells her, and when Dany clasps her hands, she beams even brighter.

Ezhi is fiddling with Dany’s hair when she hears Jon’s voice right outside the door. She turns towards the sound. Jon was meant to be getting ready, too. She can’t imagine why he’d be here. She can only assume the something terrible has happened, and when Grey Worm opens the door to reveal him, she’s certain she must be right. Her heart plummets. Jon’s in what he’ll wear when they wed, handsome and strong as always, but his hair is wild as if he’s run a long distance, and Dany sees what looks like soot on his hands.

“What?” she asks softly. He walks over and stands before her, brimming with some emotion Dany hasn’t quite named yet. He goes to speak, but then stops. His eyes dance over her face, down her body. His odd expression softens and morphs into a smile, one that makes his eyes crinkle up in the corners, the scar above his left eye rise. Dany’s heart rises with it. “What?” she asks again.

He reaches up as if to take her face in his hands, but then he glances at the blackness on his palms and thinks better of it.

“Come with me,” he tells her.

“Where?” Dany demands, confused.

“Trust me.”

She hesitates. “Should I change?”

He shrugs his cloak off and wraps it around her. “No time.”

She holds the cloak closed around her dress with one hand while Jon takes her other. She realizes, as he leads her up the stairs of the Maidenvault, that he’s excited, not frightened. Not upset. That realization makes her stomach clench in anticipation. Her mind spins with what could have pulled this reaction from him, where he could be taking her, what she would see. He leads her to the roof, some place she had been only one time prior (that time also with Jon, though it had been the dead of night). The sun is painfully bright as they step out underneath it: Dany’s head throbs with
pain as she squints against it. Jon pulls on her hand, leading her down the parapet walk. When they turn a corner, Jon stops walking. And Dany feels as if her heart has taken flight within her chest. Her hand spasms around Jon’s; her eyes burn with tears. But even through those tears, Drogon’s massive, dark shape is clear.

She lets go of Jon’s hand with the intention of running across the remaining parapet, to Drogon, to her son. But he beats her to it. Wind beats Dany’s face as he takes flight, soaring over to where she is, landing hard on the edge of the parapet wall. Dust cascades down the edge of the structure, and Dany feels the stones beneath her feet tremble, but she fears nothing. She closes her eyes with joy as Drogon’s head nudges her arm, and when she clasps her arms gently around his neck, he rumbles contently. The sound vibrates in Dany’s bones.

“Where did you go?” she hears herself ask, her words choked with tears—with joy. She opens her eyes and pulls back, looking up at Drogon’s eyes. He shuts them lazily as she strokes his sun-warmed scales, indifferent to the ash and dirt coating her hands. “Don’t ever go again,” she orders, and he rumbles again. It’s a happy sound. But Dany can’t keep from crying. She had tried her hardest not to think about it, but part of her had been certain she would never see Drogon again. And here he was, warm and alive, as beautiful as he’d always been. Perhaps more so.

She tenses when he leans his head down above hers and sniffs at her wound, knowing the pain would be insurmountable if he accidentally nudged her injury as he sniffed. But he’s her blood, the blood of the dragon, and he seems to realize how badly the wound hurts her. He’s almost adorably careful as he sniffs, making sure to keep a tiny bridge of space between his giant nose and her head, and Dany hears his unhappy groan.

“It’s okay,” she tells him in Valyrian. She continues stroking his scales, craning her head back to find his eyes again. “I’m okay.”

He nearly blows Jon’s cloak off her as he moves his head down to her stomach, his breath a vast gust against her. He sniffs at her stomach with the same intensity he’d sniffed her wound. Dany sees Jon approach them from the corner of her eye; he takes her hand, Drogon continuing to inspect. When Dragon rumbles contentedly again, Dany feels relief flow through her body, scalp to toes.

“She’s okay, too,” she tells Drogon, and she cares little about the dirt she knows must be rubbing onto her face as she leans her cheek against his scales. She doesn’t know where he’s been all this time, but she knows it must’ve been somewhere full of ash and dirt.

She hears the soft sound of Jon’s hand patting Drogon. She keeps her eyes closed, listening to the far off sounds of the city, Drogon’s scales warm against her cheek, Jon’s hand still in hers. She tries to think of a happier moment. She can’t come up with one.

“Did he come to you?” Dany asks Jon.

“When you were bathing this morning, one of my men said they saw him flying above the city again. I had them bring three goat carcasses up here. I didn’t know if it would work. I hoped it would. One of my soldiers waited just inside; he said the structure shook when Drogon landed. He came and found me.”

She knows no words in any language to express the depth of her gratitude, the force of her love. So she lets go of his hand, turns her face to his, and kisses him, trying her hardest to pour every emotion into that kiss. She thinks she must succeed by the way he gazes at her when she pulls back.

“Blood of my blood,” she hears herself say in Dothraki, her heart impossibly tender. Impossibly full. She strokes Jon’s cheek, lets that hand slide down his neck. She wants nothing more than to take him
with her on Drogon’s back right now. She imagines the joy she’d feel circling over King’s Landing, the wind kissing her skin, everything she needs with her.

But she can’t destroy the dress Annet spent so much time on. And she is even more dedicated to the wedding now than she’d been before. So she drops her hand from Jon’s shoulder, turns to look into Drogon’s fiery eyes, stroke his scales one more time, and commands him not to go far. To come back to her. He rumbles again, the sound deep and lovely. Like Jon’s eyes. The lovely-dark.

“They won’t be happy about that,” Jon says, speaking of Ser Davos and Tyrion, ‘that’ being her disheveled state. His fingers brush over the dirt on Dany’s cheek and hair.

She doesn’t have a care in the world.

V.

She’s married beneath the stars, her and Jon illuminated by thousands of candles held in the hands of their people. The ceremony is unique to them, different from every one that came before it, and so is her joy. So are they.

Dany has never held any real faith in any gods, not even the seven-faced god that her House had long ago converted to. But that night, the world around them a moving sea of fire-lit stars, Jon’s face the only clear thing in the world, his hand on hers, a ribbon soft as a kiss wrapped around their wrists, she thinks she might feel something there with her. Some force of goodness, of light. Of love.

“Father, Smith, Warrior, Mother, Maiden, Crone, Stranger…” with each name she speaks, she shivers in the cool evening air. The breeze rustles her dress and makes the candlelight around them flicker and quake sporadically. She clutches onto Jon’s hand like he’s the only thing keeping her from rising up into the sky. And perhaps he is.

“I am hers, and she is mine. From this day, until the end of my days,” Jon says, his words in tandem with her like vow (I am his, and he is mine. From this day, until the end of my days). His eyes are so focused on hers she thinks it’s likely he doesn’t even see the thousands of people crowded around them. She feels as if she’s the only person that exists. And when he says what comes next, his voice is strong, clear. Kingly.

“With this kiss, I pledge my love,” he recites. And as his hand settles against her neck and his lips join hers, she thinks to herself that she has never felt more like a queen.

The joy inside her chest bursts out around them in the sound of applause, a thousand cheers, a thousand cries. She rests her head against Jon’s chest when their kiss ends, wanting to stay there in that moment with him as long as possible, the illuminated sea around them alive with joy. With happiness. With pride. She feels a shift in the air, a gust stronger than the natural breeze, and when she and Jon look up, they see a dark winged shadow block the light from the moon for a moment in time. Dany laughs, her face tilted up towards the moon, towards Drogon.

Their guests— anyone who wanted to come, everyone who could— are treated to a feast. They eat first while Dany and Jon sit together at a pine table in the heart of the celebrations. Dany feels delirious with happiness, with the exuberance of the people around them, with the way Jon hasn’t let go of her for even one moment since their vows. Grey Worm, two of Dany’s most trusted bloodriders, and a couple of Jon’s best Northern soldiers sit around them, but Dany never feels threatened by any of the commonfolk who come up to wish them congratulations, their hands stretching across the table to touch the Queen and King’s hands.

She and Jon hardly have a moment to speak, but there’s nothing she needs to say. She keeps one of
her hands in his and he sits so close that their sides are always touching.

They’re brought a plate by Ser Davos and two Unsullied, once all their guests have eaten. There’s not much on it, and hardly any cake left, but Daenerys wants for nothing. She enjoys the sight of the commonfolk laughing, dancing, and eating more than she enjoys the sweetness of the cake or the saltiness of the roast. Poison doesn’t even cross her mind; she doesn’t worry about anything at all. And when the gifts she and Jon were able to arrange are passed out to the people, and Dornish wine flows generously into any waiting cup, the happiness of the celebration seems to morph at once to pure, unassuming love.

“You were right,” Tyrion tells her soon after this, his own goblet in hand. He stands by Jon and Dany’s table, his eyes on the people. “They love you both. You were right.”

She’s not certain exactly what he’s admitting she was right about. She wants to think he’s speaking of Jon, but she knows he’s probably not. Still—even Tyrion’s recent transgressions can’t dampen her mood.

“Shall we dance?” she asks Jon.

He’s as handsome as he’s ever been in the moonlight, in the candlelight. There’s a radiance to his face that she’s never seen before, a peace she doesn’t think he had before tonight. A steadiness in himself, in what he’s chosen. In who he is. She delights in it; it makes her skin tingle, her heart jolt. She would have taken him to bed right then were there a bed to be had.

“I fear my dancing might be taken as an act of treason,” he jests.

“I’ll choose your punishment wisely,” she says, tugging on his hand.

His ‘dancing’ is little more than clutching her to the front of his body and swaying, but Daenerys takes no issue with that. She clutches him just the same, swaying with him to some beat quite different from the music swelling from the fiddlers. When she presses her ear to his chest, she can hear the echo of his heartbeat. She closes her eyes.

Around them, she can hear lovers talking as they dance together, children giggling, the clinking of glasses. She wears no crown, but she takes full responsibility for this lovely kingdom. And she claims every bit of the man holding her.

“You don’t have any moves better than that?” Ser Davos teases, his voice raised above the music and the conversation around them as he joins them. Dany doesn’t lift her head from Jon’s chest, but she smiles.

“Find a dame to dance with and show me you can do any better,” Jon shoots back.

“I don’t imagine I’ll find a woman in this crowd who can hold a candle to your lady, Snow,” Ser Davos laughs.


“A night of firsts,” Ser Davos says. Dany suddenly feels his hand at her elbow. “Congratulations, Your Grace.”

She turns to look at him. She surprised by how much affection she feels at the sight of his smile.

“Thank you, Ser,” she says genuinely.
She looks up at Jon in hopes of seeing his smile. But he’s looking to the other side of the gathering, and she feels his arms tense around her. She follows his gaze with some struggle: there are so many people now she couldn’t hope to estimate how many. It takes her a moment, but she finally sees what he sees. There, at the fringe of the celebrations, her face impassive: Arya.

Daenerys looks up at Jon at the same moment he looks down at her. His arms around her loosen slightly, and she feels her heart sink. Don’t, she wants to plead. Don’t go anywhere. Stay. Stay.

When he steps back, ending their dance, she thinks he’s going to leave her there amongst the dancing crowd, alone beneath the stars. But he takes her hand in his and nods Arya’s way.

She’s unsure. “I don’t think it’s me she wants to see.”

His handtightens around hers. “I don’t care what she wants. You’re her family now. Where I go, you go.”

His eyes burn into hers. She sees fire dancing in them, a familiar flame. She nods.

They walk through the dancers together, people parting easily for them as if they’re surrounded by some invisible force. As they draw closer and closer to Arya, Dany realizes she’s frightened of her. Not because she thinks Arya will do her any physical harm; Grey Worm is still nearby, taking his duty to get her through this day safely very seriously, and Drogon has been circling the sky above them for hours. She’s frightened because Arya has the power now to sour what Dany thinks may be the best night of her entire life. The most happiness she’s ever felt. She doesn’t want it taken away. She’s scared to lose it.

But she needn’t worry. Jon tucks her to his side as soon as they stop in front of Arya, his posture so defensive he might as well have walked up with a verbal threat.

Arya studies them both, her face still relatively devoid of all emotion. Dany isn’t sure how to greet her: she’s Jon’s sister, and he cares for her, but as far as Dany knows, she’s been playing a role in Sansa and Bran’s treason. She spots someone standing beside Arya, and that’s an easier interaction to wade through.

“Lord Baratheon,” she greets, and she’s able to force a smile onto her face. She holds her hand out towards him; he takes it in his and kisses it, his smile true.

“Your Grace. It was a lovely ceremony,” he tells her.

“Thank you,” Dany says. Her eyes dart to Arya once more. “I hope your travels were safe, Lady Stark.”

Arya’s eyes meet hers for the first time. Dany realizes with a jolt to her heart that they’re lovely-dark like Jon’s. Not quite the same shade, but similar in another way Dany can’t place.

“Arya,” Arya tells her. “I’m just Arya.”

Jon pulls Dany closer.

“Arya,” Dany tries carefully. “All right.”

Arya nods. Her eyes flicker between Dany and Jon again, finally landing on Jon. She studies him for what feels like an awkward span of time; Dany’s not sure what to do as she does, and she and Gendry Baratheon share a couple quick, awkward smiles. It’s the sound of laughter that pulls Dany’s attention back to Arya. She’s surprised to find her beaming, and Jon beaming, and when Arya...
reaches out to hug him, he hugs her back with his free arm. But he doesn’t drop his arm from Dany’s waist.

“I never expected you’d come,” Jon tells Arya when she steps back. He musses her hair affectionately.

“Neither did I,” Arya admits. “But we need to talk.” Her eyes travel to Dany’s. “All of us.”

“We do,” Jon agrees. “And we will. Tomorrow. Tonight— be my sister. Be happy for me.”

She smiles again. This time, it almost meets her eyes. “That’s never something I’ve ever had to pretend to be. And though I never imagined I’d ever willingly be at a Targaryen wedding— I am happy for you. I’m happy that you’re happy.”

His happiness is undeniable; Daenerys is certain that’s the only reason Arya’s even being slightly civil to her right now. But all things considered, she’d expected a much worse greeting from her.

“And I’m happy you’re here,” Jon admits. In his happiness, he’s more open and soft than Dany’s ever seen him. It makes her heart migrate up her throat.

“I see they’re still passing out Dornish wine,” Gendry comments. He looks at the three of them.

“Shall we?”

“All right,” Jon agrees, after sharing a quick look with Dany.

The four of them walk together back to the table Jon and Dany had started the celebration at. Tyrion’s at the table right beside theirs; his jaw drops at the sight of Arya Stark, but Dany pays him no mind. She sits between Jon and Arya, and when Gendry brings them all goblets of wine, she hardly minds the smell.

“To the Queen and King,” Gendry smiles, holding his goblet out.

Daenerys and Jon knock their goblets into Gendry’s. After a slight pause, Arya’s joins theirs. She takes a long sip of her wine afterwards— Jon raises his eyebrows, visibly impressed.

“To my brother and his aunt,” Arya says, deadpanned.

Gendry chokes violently on his sip of wine. Daenerys looks to Jon at once, genuinely unsure what to say. He’s staring at Arya as if she’d knocked him over the head with something heavy, and Dany, for all she tries, can’t find an ounce of shame in her heart.

She leans forward, posture still tall and proud, and touches her goblet to Arya’s, refusing to feel ashamed. Arya looks at her, and when their eyes meet, Dany lifts her shoulders in an unabashed shrug. She takes a tiny sip of her wine just for decorum, and underneath the roar of the surrounding crowd, she hears Arya giggle. It’s such an expected sound from her that Dany can’t help but look at her in surprise.

“Cheeky,” Jon finally says, scowling Arya’s way. “Stupid— but cheeky.” She raises her glass to him again, unfazed.

Even a week ago, Dany would have be taken over by fear right now. She would have analyzed every one of Jon’s words, looks, and touches after their blood relation was addressed. But tonight, she finds she doesn’t care. It’s true— it’s what they are. It’s nobody’s fault, and they can’t do anything about it, and she couldn’t care to try even if she could fix it somehow. He’s her family. And he’s her love. And perhaps that’s part of their Targaryenness that they don’t care; perhaps they’re just
a product of their bloodline. But nothing has ever made her happier. How could it be wrong?

“Who invites you anywhere?” Jon says to Arya, seemingly deciding to go back to teasing Arya. He looks at Daenerys. “Did we invite her?”

“I don’t recall,” she lies, playing along.

“As if you could keep me away,” Arya scowls. She glances up at the dark sky. “That dragon would have to carry me off himself.”

“We could arrange that, if you like,” Daenerys quips, taking another small sip of the Dornish wine.

“Oh, I dare you,” Arya shoots back, her smile sharp, predatory, but the sharpness doesn’t quite reach her eyes.

“You’d struggle to find anyone here who likes a challenge so much as me,” Daenerys allows. “You don’t do anything the easy way.”

“Nor you,” Daenerys acknowledges. Jon’s hand settles on her thigh beneath the table; she takes that to mean this is going as well as it could, and that makes her heart jump with excitement. She had wanted this so much for so long. Ever since she fell in love with Jon. Maybe even before that. “The Hero of Winterfell. Of Westeros.”

Arya grows cagey beneath the compliment. Daenerys isn’t sure what she’s done wrong, but she maintains a cool countenance as she waits for Arya’s response.

“There would have been nothing to be the hero of without you. Nothing to save,” Arya finally says, her eyes locked on something beside Daenerys’s face, never meeting her eyes. Daenerys realizes she’s embarrassed. Before she can weigh the pros and cons, she reaches over and slowly takes Arya’s hand in hers, holding it gently. Arya’s hand flinches beneath hers, but she doesn’t snatch it back.

“We all have our roles to play,” Daenerys tells her. “In war and in everything else. It’s all important. Every life is important.”

Arya looks over at the smallfolk as they dance, laugh, and eat. As they celebrate. Her hand still rests in Daenerys’s.

“My sister says you caused the explosions, the destruction of King’s Landing. That you planned it,” Arya says.

The roar of the crowd grows dim. Daenerys feels as if she’s been submerged in ice water for a moment, but seconds later, she feels hot. Nausea follows soon after. It takes every bit of her strength to remain poised. To reach over and set her hand on Jon’s leg, stilling his outrage.

“And what do you think?” Daenerys asks.

Arya looks away from the smallfolk and meets Daenerys’s eyes.

“I don’t think that.”

Daenerys relaxes. It doesn’t pass her notice that Arya hasn’t exactly said what she does believe, but it’s good enough right then. It’s good enough for Daenerys, for Jon. For them.

Above the din of the celebrations, Daenerys hears a familiar voice, followed quickly by one of the fiddlers chiming a bell to gather the crowd’s attention. She and Jon look over at Yara Greyjoy; she
looks much drunker now than she’d been earlier in the evening when she’d come over to offer her congratulations.

“TO QUEEN DAENERYS AND KING JON!” she cries, thrusting her goblet into the air like a soldier might thrust his sword. “TO HOUSE TARGARYEN!”

Bathed in moonlight, her heart on fire, Dany watches as the people of King’s Landing cheer on the House she had once thought would die with her. Quietly, her movements shielded by the table, she sets her hand on her stomach. She’s not surprised when she feels Jon’s hand join hers.
The Dragon

Chapter Notes

I can't thank you all enough for commenting and leaving kudos! I'm going to catch up on replies this week, but I just wanted you all to know in the meantime that I'm really grateful and it means a lot that you're enjoying (and supporting!) this fic and taking the time to leave such thoughtful comments.

We're hanging with Aejon again this chapter, but next chapter will probably be a mixture of both Jon and Dany's POVs for the sake of plot progression. I don't know what it is about Aejon, but man do I struggle with his chapters...praying this reads okay, if not, OOP-- I wasted an embarrassing number of hours on it smh

I.

On his first night as King of the Andals, the Rhoynar, and the First Men, Lord of the Seven Kingdoms, and Protector of the Realm, he hardly sparing a passing though to any new title but one.

The smallfolk had grasped his hand in theirs and called him King Jon all throughout the celebrations, and he as King Jon had been given quite a number of toasts by the various lords and ladies who had traveled South to take part in the union. His own sister had bid him goodnight with the parting words: Goodnight, King Jon.

But back in Daenerys’s chambers— their chambers— the window thrown open so that the sharp night air could brush their heated skin, his hands twisted in her silver hair and her body gripping his, he’s only beholden to one title: Daenerys Targaryen’s husband.

He finds such unexpected joy in it, such freedom: for the first time, he lets the inferno consume him completely, heart and body, mind and soul. Once a boy with a bastard’s name, now a man with more titles than he can keep straight, with only one that has given him what he has never truly had: a true family in his own right. She is his and he is hers, and that night, nothing in the world feels as sacred as that. As important.

From the moment he’d first met her, when he’d first laid eyes upon her—an unexpected beauty sat upon the Dragonstone throne—he had begun what was to be a long war with a screaming desire that never stopped, a desire to take her into his arms and make love to her until she was gasping in a foreign tongue. Giving into that desire that night on that boat had only fueled the fire rather than doused it. He had once been afraid of the intensity of it, but on their wedding night, he gives no power to hesitations or reservations. No power to fear. He gives everything to her— every bit of his affection, every bit of his passion. Every bit of himself. He feels as if it’s all pouring out of him after months of uncertainty and constraint, every kiss he’d ever wanted to give but hadn’t been able to, every I love you he’d ever failed to utter. He trembles from the force of it all, but if his passion unsettles his wife, it didn’t show. It’s a storm of love, and Dany, the Stormborn, weathers it with satisfaction.

He loves her madly, ’til he thinks his muscles will seize with exhaustion, ’til the scream of the iron bed frame becomes nothing more than dull, faraway background noise. ’Til he’s certain he knows exactly what she’s repeating in Valyrian, in Dothraki, ’til she’s boneless in his arms, hair spread wild
around them, her skin soaking in moonlight. 'Til, at last, he feels the screaming desire within him quiet to a contented rumble (not unlike a dragon's vocalizations.) 'Til he’s certain he couldn’t leave the bed even if he wanted to—and he doesn’t. 'Til he’s certain he’s given her all she deserves and more.

The quiet that settles over them near dawn is one of all-consuming peace. When he finally allows sleep to claim him, it’s with his arms around his family.

II.

When he wakes, she’s still asleep beside him, her body twisted in the bedsheets, her lips a splash of rose against the pillow. It’s rare that he wakes before she does, rare that he lay there and cast his eyes upon her in such a delicate state. Awake, she’s larger than life and twice as forceful; asleep, she appears as perfectly-made as the Godswood and thrice as beautiful.

For a moment, it seems absurd that he should be allowed to share her bed. He feels humbled at her side, all titles cast aside, all pride washed out. When he stretches his arm across the bedding and touches her hair, it’s with veneration, and he can hardly breathe for how wide his heart grows in his chest. He softly passes his fingers through her hair only a couple of times, and then her eyes move beneath her eyelids. As she wakes, her eyes seek his easily, and the smile that illuminates her face returns every title to him—particularly the most important one.

Of all the power he’d been given that night beneath the stars, this power is the greatest.

There’s nothing in the world that needs to be said. No hoarded words lodged deep in his scarred chest, nothing he wishes he’d done but hadn’t. Nothing at all he regrets. He’s free to smile back at her and take her into his arms, free to close his eyes and focus on nothing but the softness of her bare skin against his, the warmth of her lips against his shoulder, the rose-oil sweetness of her hair.

He cares not who finds them entangled together. Should someone come for them, he’ll tell them to leave. He’ll make them leave. He thinks the fire that had burned within him last night could easily feed a storm of violence, should he ever find her threatened—them threatened. He has no ability to feel shame.

It was always going to have to be Dany to herald the end to the morning; Jon wasn’t going to be the one to pull away, the one to stretch and sigh. He would have lay there until he had no choice but to rise, because before he was a king, he was hers.

But they have an ungodly list of responsibilities to attend to, a list the queen hasn’t forgotten. Though even she is slow to start the day.

“I imagine the guards stationed in the corridor are anxious for a meal and some respite,” she murmurs.

He keeps his face hidden in her hair. “Is this your way of sending me off?”

“No, it’s my way of admitting I need to visit the privy.”

He laughs at that and covets one more kiss before unwrapping his arms from around her and rolling over onto his back. He watches her as she moves to the edge of the bed, her hair falling down her bare back in a cascade of tangled waves. He wants nothing more than to slide across the bed towards her and kiss the base of her spine, wrap his arm around her naked waist, pull her back beneath the covers. But he takes comfort in the fact that this morning is only the first of the mornings they’ll share; they’ll have time yet.
He could stand a bath himself. His hair feels a bit stiff from dried sweat, his skin sticky and unwashed. He’s thinking about having one drawn for the both of them when he cottons on to how long Daenerys has been sitting on the edge of that bed, unmoving. He looks back at her. She’s got her head in her hands now; his heart plummets with sickening force.

“Are you upset?” he asks her at once, not pausing to even think of the words before he says them. His mind scrambles through the past day, confused, struggling to think of something he could have done to upset her.

“No,” she assures him. She holds her head tighter between her hands, her posture growing tense. “It’s my head. It’s awful this morning— I just need a moment.”

He moves over to the edge of the bed and sits beside her, his fingers going to her chin. He gently turns her face and uses his other hand to part her hair. Her wound doesn’t look anything close to how bad it’d looked at the start, but it certainly still looks painful. He goes to part the hair closer to the wound itself but freezes at her sharp hiss of pain.

He’s no maester nor healer, but he knows her injury shouldn't still be hurting her this intensely. He can’t help but worry it’s his fault somehow: maybe he’d accidentally pulled her hair near her wound last night, or knocked her into the bed frame, or otherwise pushed her too far too soon after such a horrific injury. It’s mad paranoia that casts a shadow over his thoughts, and for a moment, he wonders if that’s the same whispers Dany hears sometimes. The paranoia casts a dark, aberrant shadow over the memories of that fire that had burned within him last night. Had he been rough with her where he thought he was being passionate? Cruel where he thought he was being soft?

“Did I hurt you?”

She looks at him at that question, her hand pressing just below her wound. “No, it’s fine.”

She thinks he means just now, when he’d checked her wound. His voice is gruff as he clarifies. “Last night.”

He watches her brow furrow just slightly. Her hand drops from her head and lands in her lap. She studies his eyes, and then she smiles suddenly, softly— almost as if he’s endeared her or amused her in some way. He’s not sure what to make of it, but it soothes his heart despite. She reaches up and sets her hand against his cheek. He covers her hand with his, cradling it there.

“You’re sweet,” she tells him. She says it like she’s declaring some secret truth of theirs and theirs only.

“Sweet?” he echoes doubtfully. It’s not a word he’s ever thought of himself as. Not a word he’d ever imagined anyone would use to describe him. It’s so unexpected that it does a fair job of chasing those strange doubts from his mind. His paranoia doesn’t have much luck convincing him he’d been a maddened monster when Daenerys is declaring him sweet.

Her hand moves out from beneath his so her fingers can seek his mouth. She traces the line of his lower lip, her soft smile lighting her eyes. “Yes. Kind. Good. Honorable. No, you didn’t hurt me. You never could, and you would certainly know if you had.”

He’s not so sure. He remembers the fire that had flooded his veins last night, the passion that had swallowed him whole. Just because she’d met his passion with equal fervor didn’t mean he hadn’t been too rough.

“You don’t complain about that injury nearly enough,” he tells her. “I don’t pay it nearly as much
mind as I should.”

“You didn’t hurt me,” she repeats firmly. “You’re good to me. Always. And I know you are because men haven’t always been good to me. I’d no sooner accept mistreatment than you’d ever issue it.” She drops her hand from his face. There’s a pause before she asks her next question. “Do you trust the maester?”

He understands where her thoughts have gone. He considers what she’s asking with uneasiness.

“I don’t know. I’ve seen him save many of our soldiers. And he pulled you from the brink after your injury. But I don’t know him.”

She nods. “That’s what I was thinking as well.”

“Do you think…”

“I don’t know. But I think I ought to let my own handmaidens look at it before I let the maester put anything else in it.”

It slips from his mouth, the words snapping out of him in such a way that makes him think, suddenly and horribly, of Olly’s body plummeting at the gallows, the snap of his neck. “I’ll kill him if he has.”

“Not if I’ve killed him already,” Daenerys answers lightly. She sets her hand on his shoulder and presses on it to stand. After pressing her hand to her temple for a moment and breathing through pain, she crosses over to dress and ready for the day. Jon has no choice but to do the same.

III.

After they’ve bathed and dressed for the day, Daenerys sends for three of her Dothraki handmaidens. Jon stands on the balcony and cleans Longclaw while they tend to Daenerys, their Dothraki conversation a soothing background noise. After a couple minutes, he realizes Arya’s down below in the courtyard, sitting atop what remains of a burnt stone wall, watching two Unsullied attempt to teach two Hornwood soldiers how to properly use a short spear. The attempts are amusing at best, and when Jon looks back at Arya, he sees her biting back a smile of her own.

He and Dany will need to speak with her sooner rather than later, and he needs to begin preparations to head North. Tyrion has already sent a message through one of the guards about meeting in the council room as soon as possible about Essos, though Jon’s not even certain at this point if Tyrion is still Hand of the Queen or not, and that’s another issue he and Dany have to deal with. Ser Davos is surely waiting for Jon to verify the last shipment of gifts North, the gifts he and Dany had given to the people at the feast and arranged for the Northerners to receive, too. And at some point, they need to visit with the various lords and ladies who traveled here for the wedding.

But all of that can wait. None of it matters if Dany’s not well. When she finally joins him on the balcony, he sheaths Longclaw and turns to face her. She looks better: her pained grimace is gone and her hair is combed and braided, but he holds her face carefully in his hands and looks at her wound anyway. She smells strongly of mint, and in place of the thick salve the Red Keep’s maester had been pressing into her wound, her handmaidens applied a thin piece of translucent fabric dusted with some kind of finely ground herb.

“They couldn’t stitch it either,” she says. Jon had seen the maester struggle to do so firsthand when Dany was still unconscious; he still sometimes remembers, with a flash of nausea, the sight of him struggling to pull the two jagged edges of the deep wound together. “But the oil they put into it is nice. It feels cold like ice.”
He drops one of his hands to the back of her neck and pulls her into his embrace. She loops her arms around his waist in response.

“Do they think it’s infected?”

“No, there’s no fever. They think maybe it was a headache making the pain so much worse so suddenly. They didn’t think much of the maester’s medicines, though they don’t think he was trying to hinder my healing on purpose. They say their medicine is better and should help speed up the process.” There’s a pause. “Is that Arya down there with that spear?”

He doesn’t even need to look. He smiles, his cheek resting gently against Dany’s hair, careful not to press near her wound. “Yes.”

“I wasn’t sure she’d stay.”

“She won’t leave ’til she says what she needs to.”

“Well,” Dany tells him, “let’s hear whatever that may be. Bad news doesn’t get any better when it’s left to fester.”

He knows she’s right, but that doesn’t keep him from worrying as they walk together towards the courtyard. He doesn’t know what Arya has to say to them. He wants to believe she’s come to bend the knee to Dany, to apologize for Sansa’s treason, but he still remembers the way Arya had defended Sansa in the Godswood. What if she’s come to declare war on Sansa’s behalf? What would he do then? What would he say?

Arya watches them approach with an unreadable expression. She passes the spear in her hand back to the Unsullied and waits for Jon and Dany to reach her. Jon keeps his hand around Daenerys’s as they join Arya, though his protection is largely unnecessary: Drogon circles restlessly above them, watching over his mother with an intensity that would make any sane person nervous. Dany looks up at him briefly and smiles.

“I want to talk alone,” Arya greets them. She looks at Daenerys. “Just the three of us. No one else.”

“I’d prefer the same,” Dany answers evenly. She pulls on Jon’s hand and sets back towards the Maidenvault, but Arya doesn’t budge. Jon stays still because of it, and Dany turns back around to face her. “Was there something else?”

“Yes,” Arya says. She meets Jon’s eyes; there’s a desperation there for a brief moment, but it leaves almost as soon as it shines through. He can’t help but frown. “I need to know I can speak with you both in confidence. Without you acting rashly on what I say. I need to know that we can all talk together. That we can work together.”

Jon looks at Daenerys. She’s already looking at him.

“I’ve tried to work with you and your sister since the day I met you,” Dany answers. “You are not my enemy. Unless you’ve chosen to be.”

“I haven’t decided what I am yet,” Arya replies. “But I know that I’m a Stark. And I know that Jon is my brother— no matter what name he was born with. And I know that what my sister has been telling me isn’t right. What I need to know is that you won’t take what I have to tell you and use it to execute my sister, Your Grace.”

*Your Grace* almost sounds a bit mocking, but it *is* Arya. Jon’s just glad she hasn’t called Dany his aunt again.
“I’ve had reason to execute your sister for weeks, Arya. If I wanted to do so, I would have already,” Dany says firmly. She points towards the Maidenvault. “Shall we go speak now?”

Arya looks back at Jon. He nods her way, his hand tightening around Dany’s. Trust me, he wants to say. Trust us. Maybe she reads it in his eyes because she follows after them this time.

“I saw you with the Unsullied,” Daenerys says to Arya as they ascend the Maidenvault stairs. “You’re better with the spear than Jon’s soldiers are.”

“And not half as good as the Unsullied,” Arya answers.

“The Unsullied began training with three lengths of spear at age five. No one in the world is as good as them.”

Daenerys pauses outside the council room as one of the guards opens the door for them. Jon follows her and Arya in and waits by the door until the guard has shut it behind them firmly.

“Your brother tells me you’re dangerous with a sword,” Daenerys adds. She sits at the head of the council table, and Arya sits to her right after shooting Jon a quick look. He takes the seat to Dany’s left, right across from Arya.

“I’m all right,” Arya allows.

“She’s better than all right,” Jon says, though Dany already knows that.

“I never learned myself,” Dany says. She folds her hands atop the table. “I wish I had, but learning never seemed pressing from a dragon’s back.” She smiles wryly. “Of course, that opinion changed the moment I was no longer on a dragon’s back.”

“Visenya Targaryen did both,” Arya tells them, the words seeming to fly from her lips without prior thought. Dany arches an eyebrow, and Arya, though Jon can tell she’s been making every effort to keep Dany at arm’s length, can’t keep from continuing. “She rode Vhagar and she wielded Dark Sister. She fought in the air and on the ground. She took an arrow in the Field of Fire but kept on fighting. She once cut Aegon the Conqueror’s face to prove to him his own guards were too lazy to protect them properly. She still fought on Vhagar when she was eighty years old.”

Jon knows his sister devoured any stories or books regarding Visenya Targaryen and her sister Rhaenys while growing up, but Dany clearly hasn’t expected Arya to know as much as she does. Her eyebrows rise after Arya falls silent, and for a moment, no one says anything. Jon wonders why they’re not talking about what they came up here to talk about; he considers stopping what seems like small talk, but he doesn’t get the chance.

“But then,” Arya continues, the slight edge of excitement that had been in her previous words dulling, “she and her siblings burned over ten thousand men in the Field of Fire. She helped burn down Harrenhall and all those inside of it. She was, in many ways, responsible for her son Meagor the Cruel ending up on the Throne. So I suppose my sister is right to say she’s not the heroine I thought her to be.”

Jon watches Dany’s face. She doesn’t break her gaze from Arya’s, and Arya doesn’t break hers from Dany’s. It suddenly occurs to Jon that the conversation he’s been waiting to start already has.

“Yes,” Daenerys finally says, her voice quiet. “All of that is true. And it’s true, too, that Jaehaerys the Conciliator and Daeron the Good brought unprecedented peace and prosperity to the Seven Kingdoms, but others like Meagor the Cruel, whom you mentioned, and my father, the Mad King,
seeded the Seven Kingdoms with violence and fear. Aegon the Usurper fed his half-sister Rhaenyra to his dragon in front of her own son. The Mad King would rape my mother so brutally that it’s said she looked as though she’d been mauled by an animal, with bite marks and slashes to her skin. Even the room we sit in now, here in the ‘Maidenvault’, was built by Baelor the Blessed for the sole purpose of imprisoning his own sisters so that he wouldn’t feel tempted by them. Aegon the Unworthy caught one of his knights with one of his many mistresses and had that mistress watch as the knight was slowly dismembered in front of her. He killed her afterwards. Aegon the Unworthy also ignored all the maesters’ pleas to leave his sickly sister be after she gave him an heir and proceeded to rape her and impregnate her multiple times until she finally died in childbirth, bleeding out and torn apart—”

“Stop,” Arya interrupts, her mouth twisted in a grimace, but Dany doesn’t.

“My own brother sold me like a broodmare and would have let a thousand men and their horses rape me and thought nothing of it. If you want to speak of Targaryen cruelty, I know enough to keep us talking for a fortnight. If you want to cast us all as villains, I know stories of the worst of them. I am no fool: I know of the vicious kings who came before me. I know of the terrible deeds and decisions made by my ancestors. I know, too, of the good things they did, the things they built that still stand, the alliances they formed that live on to this day. I know of myself, of Daenerys Targaryen, a person in my own right—someone who has done what I can to free as many as I can from chains, to remove Cersei Lannister from the Iron Throne, to liberate every man, woman, and child under my rule from the wheel that crushes them. And yet, I’ve burned more people than I can count. I’ve executed betrayers, slavers, rapers. So if your sister’s claim is that I’m terrible, she’s right. I can be terrible. I can—and will—be whatever I have to be to protect my people because that is what a queen does, no matter the cost.”

When Daenerys suddenly reaches across the table and takes Arya’s hand, Arya freezes.

“Look me in the eye and tell me you’ve never been terrible, too. Look me in the eye and tell me you’ve never done a terrible thing to protect the people you love. Look me in the eye and tell me you wouldn’t do that same terrible thing again if you had to.”

Jon watches his little sister’s face. He watches the series of emotions that flash over it: fear, realization, acceptance. The silence drags on, but Arya turns her hand over beneath Dany’s, taking her hand, too. For a moment, Jon can’t look away from their joined hands; he feels a tightness in his chest, though he’s not ready yet to name it happiness. He doesn’t know what’s to come.

“I can’t,” Arya finally says quietly. She meets Dany’s eyes. “And neither can Sansa.”

Dany relaxes in her chair, and as soon as she does, Jon feels the tension in his own shoulders ease. He’s not sure what kind of test that was meant to be, but he thinks Dany passed it.

“Sansa’s made some of my men deserters,” Jon speaks up. “Despite their lords pledging fealty to the Queen and to me, she has those deserters in Winterfell, and she’s threatening to march south. Did you know that, Arya?”

Arya withdraws her hand from Dany’s. Her expression closes up; Jon’s not sure what she feels about what he’s said. He presses on.

“She wrote to us after we sent a raven about our marriage. She said ‘A King Consort is no King’. She seems to have decided to rebel against Queen Daenerys on my behalf. You can’t truly think I want that, Arya. Bran can’t think I want that. Sansa, even— Sansa can’t think I want that.”

Arya shakes her head. “I don’t think you want that. That’s why I left. I was here, in King’s Landing,
when your queen took the city. I’d come to kill Cersei, though I never got the chance. I saw those explosions—it was so loud I couldn’t hear for days afterwards, and I went back home, injured, unsure of what I’d seen. When I got there, I couldn’t speak of what I saw. Sansa tried to tell me the queen had burned the city to the ground, burned every woman and every child. But I’d seen the green flames, the green explosions, though I didn’t tell Sansa that. I didn’t tell her I’d been in King’s Landing at all. I didn’t want to speak of it, didn’t want to have to relive what I’d seen. Soon, we got word that the queen was injured, that wildfire had been set off, that Cersei had planted a trap. That made more sense to me, but Sansa told me it was a lie…yet you were still in King’s Landing, Jon. I told Sansa there’s no way you’d still be at the side of someone who’d burned women and children. And she said you would. She said the queen has you so brainwashed that you don’t even know what you want, or what’s right, or what to do. She said it was our job to protect you from her, to help secure your claim to the throne, to remind you of who you are: a Stark. She said the queen was evil, a tyrant, and it was our job to make sure she didn’t stay on the throne. And I almost believed her. She speaks quite eloquent shit.”

Jon’s anger has left his face reddened, his hands in fists. But he masters it. “I’ve noticed.”

“When we got news of the wedding, I decided to come here for myself. To check on you. To see you. To see her,” she nods at Daenerys. There’s a pause. Arya shifts her gaze to the window. “I got here before the wedding. I wanted to see King’s Landing. I was in Flea Bottom mostly. Nobody paid me any mind. I saw you. And her. Helping that woman hang her laundry. Then walking with those kids.”

Jon can’t even recall the specific instance she’s speaking of. He and Dany have spent more afternoons than he can recount amongst the people.

Arya looks back at Jon. “You looked happy. I’d rarely ever seen you that happy. And then, at your wedding…”

She doesn’t have to finish. Jon is certain the joy he’d felt that day showed prominently on his face all evening long.

“But I may not have come to see it for myself if it weren’t for Bran,” she continues.

Jon and Dany have already been listening to every word Arya utters with rapt attention, but that makes them both lean forward in their chairs.

“Bran?” Daenerys questions lightly, waiting.

For the first time, Jon thinks Arya looks nervous and genuinely uncomfortable. Her dark eyes flit around the room uneasily.

“There’s no one else here,” Dany soothes.

“You can’t ever know that for sure,” Arya argues, and those words give Jon a chill, though he couldn’t have told anybody why.

“What did Bran say?” Jon asks.

Arya stops scanning every corner of the room. She meets Jon’s eyes. “He told a lie,” she says.

Jon and Dany exchange a quick, neutral look while Arya goes back to studying the room. Jon can’t say he understands, and judging by Dany’s impassive face, she doesn’t, either.

“Whenever I’d question something Sansa would say about your claim to the Throne, or Daenerys
Targaryen’s cruelty, or the necessity for a war in Jon’s name, she and Bran would tell me they knew these things because he saw it. Because he saw everything. Because he’s the Three-Eyed Raven. He told me uncountable stories about all the terrible things the queen had done in her lifetime. He told me what was to come in the future if we didn’t march south in your name, Jon, if we didn’t get you to turn against your queen. But then…” she stops. She’d been speaking mainly to Jon, but she turns to face Dany now. “But then he lied. And he’s not supposed to be able to do that, is he? He’s supposed to be honest, unbiased, all-knowing. He looked at me, still telling me all the reasons you’re unfit to rule, all the reasons you’re as unstable as your father, and he told me that you took your dragon and you razed Flea Bottom, that you used dragonfire to level it. It’s a small detail. He probably didn’t think much of it because he and Sansa had been refuting the wildfire claim all along and insisting that you’d burned the city willingly. But I was there. I never told him I was. But I was there. And you never once sent flames down on Flea Bottom. I remember seeing you fly to the Red Keep, yes. But when Flea Bottom began exploding, it was green fire. Wildfire.”

It’s not as clear to Jon as it seems to be to Arya.

“And it didn’t make sense to me. If he can see everything, and he’s incapable of misleading or lying, why had he just said something untrue? I thought for a while that I’d just gotten confused. Maybe I hadn’t seen what I thought I had. If he can see everything, shouldn’t he have known that I was in King’s Landing? Shouldn’t he know better than to lie? But I realized quickly that being able to see everything doesn’t mean you do see everything. He’s got a singular focus now, like he’s only looking for specific things in the past and future. Things about you two. He missed me being in King’s Landing because he wasn’t looking for me. He was focused on you.”

Jon’s more confused now than he’d been before. “Why? I don’t understand, Arya.”

“I don’t either,” she says. “Sansa just got more and more insistent and wouldn’t listen when I told her we didn’t have the men to wage a war or the right to. Bran would whisper to her more and more, and when I was around to hear what he was saying, it was always things to spur her on, things to reiterate the necessity for war, the necessity of turning you two against each other for the greater good. All supposedly facts he had seen, things we’re not meant to question, and who would question him? He’s not been Bran for a long time now. Nobody understands what he is, really. I think he prefers it that way.”

Jon feels Dany’s hand grasp his beneath the table. He threads their fingers together.

“I didn’t feel right about any of it, and that’s why I decided to come here and see you both for myself. I’d wage a hundred wars for you, Jon. For my brother. And had I arrived here and found you miserable, crazed…found you to be someone different…I would have. But nothing Bran told me about you two has been right so far.”

“What do you think Bran and Sansa are trying to achieve?” Dany asks.

“I don’t know,” Arya repeats.

“Your best guess, then.”

“My best guess is that they want you dead,” Arya says bluntly. “That’s the general idea of it all, anyway. I can’t imagine how else they plan to get you off the throne.”

“Why?” Jon asks, his frustration bursting from him. Stupidly, he takes it all very personally, even though it’s not about him. He can’t help it, though. His siblings are trying to kill the woman that he loves, the woman they know he loves. He can’t help but take that personally. “Why do they want Dany dead?”
He doesn’t mean to refer to her as *Dany* in front of Arya— he saves that name for when they’re alone, the intimacy of it too great to share— but neither woman seems to notice.

“Well, I’m told it’s because she’s a psychotic tyrant,” Arya says dryly, “but I’m starting to have my doubts about that.”

Considering it’s *her* life that’s being conspired against, Daenerys is much calmer than Jon expects her to be. She closes her eyes and turns her face up towards the ceiling. She appears to be thinking, but Jon feels her hand pull from his beneath the table, and when he glances down, he sees she’s set her palm on her stomach. For whatever reason, that sight— her pale hand on her slight stomach, her expression little more than thoughtful— sets his caged rage free. It flares within his chest, hot and blinding. Right then, he cares little about why Sansa and Bran are doing what they’re doing. Right then, he wants to execute them himself. It’s easy to forget they’re his blood when they’re entirely unrecognizable. Right then, the only emotion the thought of them brings is shame.

“I’m going North. And it doesn’t matter what their reasons are. I don’t give a damn about Bran’s ‘visions’, or his bloody, vague warnings, or what stupidity Sansa’s bought into, what stupidity she’s using to dress up treason. I’m going North, and this is going to stop—”

“You can’t just—!”

“Be quiet!” Jon tells Arya, and she leans back from him, surprised. “I can and I will!”

“You said we could talk together,” Arya reminds him, her chin jutting out as it always did before she cried when she was small. It stills his mind for a moment. “You said we could work together.”

“What do you expect of me, Arya? You tell me they’re conspiring to kill my queen— my wife. What man would sit by and let that continue? What king?”

“We don’t let it continue. But she’s still your sister. And Bran… I don’t know what Bran is anymore. But he looks like our brother. What if our Bran is still in there somewhere?”

Jon thinks of the last time he’d seen Bran, the real Bran. Frail, broken— a mutilated boy in a sickbed that might have been a deathbed, his mother crying over him in a way no one had ever cried over Jon. Picturing Bran’s— the real Bran’s— deathly pale face brings pain to Jon’s heart.

But it’s pain for a boy that doesn’t exist anymore. A boy Jon had said goodbye to and never saw again. And never would.

“He’s not. Bran is gone,” Jon says harshly, “and sometimes I think Sansa is, too.”

Arya’s face falls. That’s one of the only sights in the world painful enough to give him pause once more, to make him try and think through his anger. She reaches across the table and takes his hand tightly.

“They’re still our family,” she tells him, her voice quieter now. She’s begging him.

He can feel something building within him. A terrible pressure in his chest that crawls up his throat. That makes his eyes burn.

“And Daenerys is my family,” he hears himself say. His vision grows blurry as his pain crests. “If Sansa and Bran cared for me at all, they would never do this to me. So tell me who I’m meant to be loyal to.”

Arya can’t answer. There is no good answer. Her hand loosens and falls from his; he sees tears fill
“The lone wolf dies, but the pack survives,” she tries to say, but it means little to Jon now.

“A pack that rips each other apart from the inside is no pack. A wolf would be better off alone.”

Those words affect Arya as if he’d physically struck her. She turns to look at Daenerys. Appealing to her. Appealing to the woman she and her siblings had alienated and stepped on at every opportunity. The woman their sister and brother were now, at best, plotting to overthrow, and at worst, plotting to murder. A woman who had given more than anybody to save Winterfell— their home— from the Night King and never received anything in return— not a word of kindness, not a second of gratitude, and certainly never love.

“Don’t let him,” Arya asks. Pleads. “Don’t let him execute my sister or my brother.”

Dany’s lips turn down for a moment, but little else betrays the fact that she’s taken Jon’s hand again beneath the table and she’s holding it tight. Little else betrays her own conflict.

“What would you have me do?” Daenerys asks Arya. “Imprison them?”

“Talk to them. They don’t know you— show them who you are. Show them you’ll be a good queen.”

“I should travel North and find some way to prove to them that I deserve to live? I should find some way to beg them not to conspire against me? I should bend over backwards to set their minds at ease when they’re actively committing treason?” Daenerys pins Arya with a fierce look, one that makes her suddenly appear every bit as terrifying as Sansa would have the Northmen believe she is. “No. We won’t be doing that.”

Arya leans forward earnestly. “Everyone thought it would take war to get House Arryn to surrender the Eyrie to House Targaryen. Thousands killed, countless injured. But Visenya saw another way. She had the Eyrie handed over to her, and all it took was giving one little boy a ride on a dragon.”

“A lovely story. But nonviolent compromises only work when both sides are willing to be nonviolent. I don’t want to arrest any Starks. I certainly don’t want to execute any, either. But if Jon goes to talk to them, and they refuse to bend the knee, what else can I do?”

“Convince them!”

“How? What else could I possibly do to convince them of anything? I sacrificed everything to protect the North— if that didn’t convince them, what on earth would?”

Arya turns to face Jon again. He can’t meet her eyes. “Jon, if you’ve got to go speak with them, go speak with them. But promise me you won’t execute them.”

Jon says nothing. The words stick in his throat.

“No one will be executed without a trial,” Daenerys says. “And before there’s a trial, they’ll be arrested. And before they’re arrested, Jon will speak with them and hear what they have to say. But nobody is promising they won’t be executed. I can only promise that if they are, they’ll have done something terrible enough to deserve it.”

Arya shakes her head. She looks sick. “We’re all of us terrible. Or don’t you remember?”

“That’s not the same thing and you know it,” Jon snaps, his voice booming through the room. “What
would Father say, Arya? Queenslaying, treason—what would he think?”

“He’d think it’s as horrible as we both do. I wouldn’t be here right now if I didn’t believe that.”

Jon lowers his head for a moment. He rubs over his eyes, wishing he’d never got out of bed this morning. Wishing he’d never returned to Winterfell with Dany, never left that boat. Later, he knows, he’ll recognize that as a stupid, selfish thought. But in that moment, he allows himself to be stupid and selfish.

“I’ll go speak with them,” he finally tells Arya. He lifts his face and holds her gaze. “I’ll try to understand. But they will have to speak to me, too. They’ll have to try to understand, too. If they can’t—if they refuse to bend the knee, refuse to stop plotting against the queen and against me, if they continue to be a threat—I will arrest them and execute them myself.”

Arya looks down at the table. Jon doesn’t resent her tears, her frustration. He understands it. He and Dany are quiet; they give Arya time to work through her sadness, time to quell her tears.

“I know it’s hard,” he says softly. “Truly, Arya, I don’t want this anymore than you do.”

Arya looks small to him then. Young. She answers him with her face turned down, her eyes locked on her lap.

“I thought when I finally made it back home that I’d be home. But home isn’t there anymore. My family isn’t there anymore. Being there just hurts.”

Jon can’t bear her pain. He reaches across the table again and cradles one of her hands between his. He can’t change the truth of what she’s said, though.

“I’m not who I was. And they aren’t, either. I’ll never get back what I searched for all those years. What I fought for.”

“No,” Jon agrees, though it kills him to. “The past is gone. It can’t ever return. But I’m still here, Arya. I’ve always been. And we’ve got to look to the future now.”

She meets his eyes. Hers are dark as the pool that lies by the heart tree.

“I don’t know what will be there,” she tells him. Her voice breaks. “I can’t imagine it.”

He holds tighter to her hand. “I’ll be there. I can’t speak for anything else. But I’ll be there. You’re my sister. And the fact that you came here…I’ll never be able to tell you what that means to me.”

He can think of many times in his life when he’d felt so alone and lost that the future was nothing more than a black void. He knows what it’s like to try and look forward to something you can’t even imagine, can’t picture. He wants Arya to know that she has a place here, if she wants it. That she’s his family, and now, she’s Daenerys’s, too. He wants to tell her he’s going to be a father, that they’ve all got something to look forward to. A future to help protect. But not all of that is his alone to say, his alone to share.

A knock on the council room door draws their attention away from Arya. Jon and Daenerys exchange a frustrated look. Jon stands.

“We’ll talk again tonight, Arya. Okay? Will you stay? Or will you go back to Winterfell?”

“I’m not ever going back to Winterfell again,” she tells them both, and though it’s possible she’s being slightly dramatic in her pain, he believes her anyway.
Arya and Tyrion cross paths as she steps from the council room. Jon doesn’t miss the sour look she gives the Lannister, nor the surprised one he gives her in return. As soon as Tyrion has sat at the end of the table across from the Daenerys, one of the guards shuts the door. The wary look Tyrion wears tells Jon this is going to be a long meeting, and Jon, feeling his stomach clench in hunger, remembers that he and Dany haven’t even had the chance to eat yet today. It makes him even less receptive to Tyrion’s counsel.

“Arya Stark?” Tyrion asks them. “What did Arya Stark want?”

Dany ignores the question. “What of Essos?”

He hedges. “Might I remind you first that we’re in Westeros?”

“Might I remind you that the people of Essos remain, now and forever, my people?”

“Fair enough,” Tyrion mutters, his argument shot from the sky before it’d even fully taken flight. He meets Jon’s eyes momentarily and then begins. “Daario Naharis reported the presence slaver ships in the Bay of Dragons. These ships were taken down with little casualty on our side, though it speaks to a larger issue happening across Essos. It seems, Your Grace, your absence has emboldened those left in the shadows.”

“Not at all surprising,” Dany comments. “It’s difficult to fear someone a world away.” Both Jon and Tyrion watch as she stands and walks to the window, her back to them as she peers out at Drogon weaving through the clouds. Both men exchange another look in the silence that follows, until Dany speaks again. “I will have to make an appearance then, if my absence has lulled them into false security.”

Jon pushes his chair back and stands at once, the thought gripping his chest with terror. He crosses over to his queen—his wife—and stands by her at the window, his expression detailing every bit of his distaste with that idea.

“Dany,” he mutters where only she can hear, his tone slightly reproachful.

Tyrion, for once, agrees with Jon. “With all due respect, Your Grace, the Queen has no business climbing atop a dragon and flying to Essos to execute slavers.”

Jon wishes Tyrion would shut up. He doesn’t think Tyrion’s likely to do anything but convince Dany to do the opposite of what he’s asking. Jon takes Dany’s hand in his and pulls gently, just enough to twist her to face him so he can meet her eyes. He says nothing else, but his gaze does. He studies her eyes steadily, darts his gaze meaningfully to her head injury, loops an arm around her waist and pulls the front of her body agains this, where they both feel the swell pressed between them.

“I can’t just leave them. I can’t just let them slide back into chains,” she says, but Jon knows the words are mostly for him.

“So we’ll find a different way,” he says. He tightens his arms around her. “Please, Dany.”

Her eyes flutter closed. She inhales deeply, obvious strife weighing on her thoughts. Jon waits with bated breath. When she twists from his arms and turns to walk back to the council table, he’s afraid.

“We’ll send an army underneath Grey Worm’s command. The slavers will have a choice to flee or die. There is no other option.”

It’s a compromise, but Jon can’t say he’s happy about it.
“That would take from our forces at hand here,” Jon reminds her, though he’s sure she doesn’t need reminding.

“Only a problem if you anticipate continued issues from the North,” she shoots back. Her eyebrows rise. “Do you?”

“No. I will deal with that. But we can’t assume the North is our only threat. Just because they’re our only current threat doesn’t mean we won’t be faced with another as soon as half or more of our army disappears.”

Tyrion looks unhappy about it, but he says: “I agree with Jon.”

“King Jon,” Dany corrects him sharply. The look she and Tyrion share tells Jon neither are over their previous disagreements no matter how nicely they may be playing now. “What other threats should I anticipate? The North is the only kingdom in rebellion, the only kingdom not pledged to us. Queen Yara rules the Iron Islands, yes, but Queen Yara is one of our strongest allies.”

She’s not said anything untrue, but Jon isn’t reassured. He knows most of his discomfort is personal in nature: he doesn’t want her here alone, without him, with half her armies and Grey Worm gone. The thought floods him with a fear he can’t name, a type of fear he’d felt little of before in his life.

“Send men underneath somebody else,” he says. “Not Grey Worm.”

“Grey Worm is my bravest soldier, my most skilled, and my most loyal.”

“Which is precisely why he shouldn’t be the one to leave your side.”

Dany’s eyes snap to his. “Maybe you shouldn’t be the one to leave my side.”

“So we send men to Winterfell and have the two remaining Starks in the North arrested and taken back to King’s Landing for execution? Yes, that will go over very well with the vassal houses.”

“The king is right,” Tyrion chimes in. “He must go to Winterfell. There’s no other way.”

Jon and Dany, in immediate synchrony: “Be quiet, Lord Tyrion.”

“You know I speak the truth.”

“I know you think you’re going to manipulate me off to the North while you’re left here alone with our queen,” Jon bites, “and that’s not happening. If I’m to go North, you’re coming, too. It’s up to you whether you come voluntarily or as a prisoner.”

Tyrion’s face creases with pain. He looks from Jon to Dany, but Dany remains impassive. He turns back to Jon.

“I’m not the enemy,” he tries to say.

“Then prove it to me,” Jon orders. “Come North with me. Help me talk sense into Sansa. Bran.”

“I’m not a miracle worker,” Tyrion scoffs. “I can’t talk sense into anyone where sense may not be.”

“You’d better let me see you trying your damn hardest despite.”

The lull that follows is tense, heated. Jon refuses to drop his eyes from Tyrion’s; the Hand of the Queen eventually looks away, turning his eyes to Dany, who’s staring resolutely at the door, her spine rigid.
“Where is Ser Davos?” she asks suddenly. “Send for him. I want his counsel.”

Neither Jon nor Tyrion rise. Jon guesses Tyrion wants to be the one to leave the queen’s side even less than he does. They regard each other with distrust over the table, both gripping the edge of it. Finally, Tyrion calls one of the guards outside by name and orders him to fetch Ser Davos and bring him here at once. Leaving the three of them stewing in silent uneasiness for the next quarter hour as they wait.

IV.

Ser Davos brings with him a kind of simple gruffness that eases the tension in the room markedly.

“I can’t see what the dilemma is, Your Graces,” Ser Davos says. “Seems to me the necessary steps are same as they were. King Jon and Lord Tyrion should go North, as discussed before. We all know the best way to avoid conflict with the North is by finding a way to compromise with House Stark. Now, whether or not that will be possible is something different, but we should at least try to avoid as much bloodshed and strife as possible while we still have the ability to.” He turns to face Dany directly. “Your Grace, the situation in Essos sounds to be escalating, and if it is still a priority to you—”

“It is.”

“Then we should deal with it in the most effective way possible, but not at the expense of your reign’s security here. I believe Daario Naharis is still ruling in your stead alongside his Second Sons?”

“Yes,” Daenerys allows, inclining her head in agreement.

“How many men strong?” Ser Davos asks, looking between Tyrion and Dany questioningly.

“Two thousand, I believe,” Tyrion answers.

“Sounds as if their two thousand are holding their own. We should send reinforcements to make sure things remain in control, but no more than a thousand of our own men unless we’re given reason to think more are needed, and in my personal opinion, Your Grace, it doesn’t sound like they are. We can secure the Bay of Dragons easily.”

“And the rest of Essos?” Dany asks.

“Well, I imagine any further conquering will have to wait until you’ve recovered and brought the future of House Targaryen safely into the world,” he says bluntly. “What’s important right now, Your Grace, above all else, is getting things as stable here as possible. You’re needed here, and because of that, we need you and Jon surrounded by the best guards, the best army. Including Grey Worm. It’s more important now than ever that you’re surrounded by people you trust.”

Jon’s never respected Ser Davos more. For a moment, gazing at him, he feels that same sense of pride and security Ned Stark’s presence had once given him.

“And who will lead my thousand men East?”

“Seems to me Grey Worm, as Master of War, will have no problem finding someone suitable for us within the ranks,” Ser Davos shrugs.

Jon feels Dany’s gaze, and when he meets her eyes, he sees a silent question there. In answer, he sets his hand on her knee. He’s relieved when her hand covers his.
“Now, I know this might not be the best time, but I wanted some clarification on which wine we’re sending North…”

“Whatever is left, whatever we have,” Dany answers. Jon sees her shift in her chair and wonders if she’s gripped by hunger like he is, too. He appreciates now why a full small council is needed: he can’t imagine he and Dany will ever have time to eat again if everything falls to them and one (or two) others. “We trust you, Ser Davos. Send what you think is best; we give you our blessing on whatever you choose.”

Ser Davos looks to Jon. He nods in agreement.

“Is there anything else?” Jon asks their advisors.

Tyrion shuffles in his chair and withdraws a rolled stack of parchment from an inner pocket of his vest. Jon senses Dany’s repressed sigh. He slides forward in his chair, bringing him imperceptibly closer to her, his hand moving up on her thigh. His thumb caresses back and forth; comforting her makes him feel comforted, too.

“I have a Builder’s report from Flea Bottom and our itemized agenda from the Coin—”

“Building’s going great,” Ser Davos interrupts him, brusque. His eyes are on Jon and Daenerys; Jon wonders if he can read their weariness. “Great stuff happening in Flea Bottom, and like we expected, it’s made a world of difference to the smallfolk that you’ve prioritized their full repair before any work will be done here in the Red Keep. The agenda’s what we decided on last week, only now we’ve gotten the funds distributed for each item and we’re ready to move forward with our next item agenda. Now— you two go take your meal. If anything of immediate importance happens, we’ll come find you.”

Jon doesn’t need to be told twice. He and Dany rise, and as soon as they’ve left the council room, he wraps his arm around her waist and exhales.

V.

After a shared lunch, Dany takes his hand in hers and pulls him back inside the Maidenvault.

“I thought you said you couldn’t stand another minute holed up in here,” he reminds her. They’d had their meal brought to them in that half-destroyed greenhouse they’d taken such a liking to. Jon had been as thankful for the fresh air as Dany had been.

“I can’t. And we’re not,” she answers, taking him to the stairs. He understands quickly enough. They walk the parapet, coming to a stop as Drogon swoops down to land.

“It’s like he knew we were coming to him,” Jon says, and he can’t help but laugh, as bemused and delighted by the dragons as he’s always been.

Dany lets go of Jon’s hand and approaches Drogon. She caresses the scales along the side of his face, her smile beautiful enough to leave Jon momentarily staring like a lovesick fool. She rests her cheek against the dragon’s scales, leaking affection with every breath, and then she meets Jon’s eyes. “Are you coming?”

He’s unsure. “You’re Drogon’s rider.”

“Others have been on him before. I’ll be with you. Besides— he’s fond of you, you know.”

Jon casts a skeptical look at Drogon, his uncertainty only bolstered by the dragon’s particular leer. “I
don’t know.”

She drops her hand from Drogon’s scales and crosses back over to Jon. She takes both his hands in her, her smile bright and endearing.

“Are you afraid?” she asks him.

He casts another look at Drogon as he leans forward, watching their every interaction with piercing eyes. “Er…a bit, yeah.”

“Don’t be. Come with me. Be with me,” she asks of him. And how could he deny her that?

Surprisingly, getting on Drogon is much different than getting on Rhaegal. Rheagal had been smaller, which Jon assumed would make the journey onto his back easier, but he finds climbing upon Drogon an easier feat. Maybe because Drogon’s used to having a rider, or maybe because Dany extends her hand down and helps him up, but it’s not as nerve-racking of an experience as it’d been all the times he’d climbed on Rhaegal.

Of course, he soon realizes each dragon’s specific personality plays a role in the journey itself. Rhaegal had been joyous, a bit show-offish, and— Jon thought— a bit funny in whatever ways dragons could be funny.

But Drogon is intense, powerful— Jon barely has time to grasp Dany’s waist before Drogon shoots into the air like they’re being pursued, the force of the launch nearly causing Jon to tumble backwards off his vast back. He drops his arms from Dany’s waist out of fear of pulling her down with him and grasps at whatever scales he can get any sort of purchase on, the sharp wind causing his eyes to stream with tears and pain. Over the rush of the violent wind, Jon hears Dany laughing.

“Are you all right?” she demands, turning her head back to look at him. He doesn’t know what his face shows, but she reaches a hand back and grabs a fistful of his jerkin, hoisting him forward with surprisingly strength so that his chest is pressed to her back again. He cautiously wraps his arms around her waist.

It seems to take ages until Drogon levels out and slows his pace. Jon risks a glance down towards the ground; just like the other times, he’s struck with awe and fear at how far below everything is. How small everything in the world seems. How unimportant. He tightens his arms around Dany and ducks his head, pressing a kiss to the curve of her neck. Her hand settles on the back of his head in response, her nails scratching at a his scalp in a way that makes him repress a shiver. He feels stable enough now to loosen his arms somewhat, to let his hands caress the shape of her body, his lips moving from her shoulder to her neck. There’s no one up here to pull them apart. No one up here to ask anything of them at all— no one but each other.

“The way you feel about me going to Essos is how I feel about you going North,” she tells him.

He presses his forehead against her shoulder and sighs.

“I’m still hoping you can think of a better solution.”

“I don’t know one. But I want you to understand how I feel.”

“I do, Dany.”

“Then you’ll keep yourself safe. If you truly understand how I feel, you’ll do whatever you have to do to keep yourself safe. To come back to me.” She twists to the side enough to give her space to look back at him. Underneath the Southern sun, her eyes remind him of amethysts. “Whatever you
have to do, you must do it, and then you must come back.”

He slides his hand down the side of her waist, over her hip, down to her leg. He sets his hand on her thigh, his palm warming the tough fabric of the riding breeches hidden beneath her dress. He leans in and kisses below her ear, her hair soft as it brushes against his face.

“Is that an order, Your Grace?”

She turns her face, bringing it close to Jon’s. His heart fills every void in his chest, and as her eyes drift shut at the touch of his hand, he feels his stomach tighten. Her breath is warm against his lips.

“The most important one I’ve ever given.”

He reaches up and cradles her face in his hands, bringing his lips forward to meet hers. He kisses her softly at first, and then harder, his hands moving to her hair as she twists her body around to face him as best she can. He drinks in the taste of her mouth for only a few seconds before he feels a sudden, terrifying shift in stability. Drogon shifts forward into a nosedive with no warning, causing Jon and Dany to have to scramble for purchase. Dany easily steers Drogon back up after a few horrifying moments, but the damage has been done: Jon’s heart is slamming so hard into his ribs that he feels a bit sick.

“He’s just a bit touchy about sharing me, I think,” Dany admits, a bit sheepishly.

Jon pats weakly at Drogon’s scales, his heart still lodged in his throat. “Noted. My apologies.”

She laughs again, entirely at ease there in the air, Jon behind her, Drogon beneath. He can’t help but think that if Sansa and Bran could see her like this—radiant, powerful, her goodness shining as brightly beneath the sun as her silver-gold hair, that they wouldn’t have any more doubts. But he’s sure that’s naivety on his part.

They enjoy the warmth of the sun and the peace of each other’s company for a time, but at the back of Jon’s mind all the while is the fact that this is probably their only chance to talk about the things they need to talk about, uninterrupted and entirely private. She sees that, too.

“Do you still trust Arya?” she asks.

Jon forces himself to think through that question rather than answering on instinct.

“To some degree,” he settles on. “But I think she’s lost.”

“Yes, I was thinking the same. I can’t blame her.”

“Nor I,” Jon admits. He had, after all, been lost due to similar reasons. A house divided brought no comfort. A pack at war brought no safety.

“She needs you,” Daenerys tells Jon, her voice softer now. “I think, in many ways, you’re the only family she still recognizes. I think that’s why she truly came here. When everything’s been stripped away, we cling to whatever remains.”

He presses his face against her shoulder. “I wish I could fix it all. I wish I could make it all better for her.”

“I do, too,” she says, and he can hear the sincerity of that. It only makes him love her more. Respect her more. “I would fix it all if I could. If it wouldn’t destroy us.”
“I know you would,” he assures her. “Perhaps things will make more sense in Winterfell. Perhaps I’ll be able to find a peaceful solution. Perhaps Tyrion will rise to the occasion and be helpful for once.”

“I won’t be holding my breath.”

He makes a sound of agreement. He isn’t too optimistic, either, but he knows he’s going to try his best all the same.

“I wish we could tell Arya about the baby. I think it would be easier if we could…she’d understand more of where we’re coming from.”

“Mmm. Not sure that’s the best idea. That’s not information I’d want Sansa to have.”

“Shouldn’t it be information that Bran has? They’ve got to know already.”

“I don’t know if I believe that Bran sees half of what he says he does. But if they do know, that’s even more reason to arrest them. It makes their treason even more unforgivable.”

He knows she’s right. If they know Dany is with Jon’s child, that means their plot for her downfall—and, almost certainly, her death—is undeniable kinslaying. He doesn’t want to believe they would do that. And he doesn’t believe Arya would.

“Arya would never go along with that. Ever,” Jon says. “If she knew they might be plotting all this knowing you’re pregnant, she’d turn on them.”

“It just depends who she feels more loyalty to. You or to Sansa. You or to Bran.”

Maybe it makes him a fool, but he can’t help but feel like it’s always been him.

VI.

He can’t get himself to leave for the North until he feels confident that everything is in line here in King’s Landing, so it takes him a number of days to plan and prepare himself. That preparation gives him and Dany a bit more time to enjoy each other’s company as often as they get the chance—which isn’t as often as Jon would like—and it gives them a chance to visit with their few allies that remained in King’s Landing for a spell after the wedding, particularly Gendry and Yara.

They’re a welcome distraction from the stress of Jon’s impending departure—particularly Yara, who is the least queenly queen Jon has ever met and is likely to ever meet. She makes Dany laugh harder than anyone else, and Jon often spends their meals in stitches himself. It helps, too, that Yara and Arya form a quick kinship (not at all unexpectedly). What is unexpected, though, is whatever Arya forms with Gendry. Whatever that ‘something’ is, Jon doesn’t know: he has little interest in puzzling it out. His sister isn’t a child anymore, but that won’t stop him from loving her that way all the same, from viewing her with the same protective eye he’d cast over her when she was a little girl. All that matters to him is that Gendry makes Arya smile. Anything else is Arya’s business.

The best development in Jon’s eyes is the way that Daenerys seems to flit in and out of Yara and Arya’s conversations with more ease each day. Yara’s utter, unapologetic reverence and respect for Dany appears to rub off on Arya more and more. Jon watches them at mealtimes, his heart warm in his chest, wanting nothing more than to stop time and let Dany just live in each moment of laughter for as long as possible.

Perhaps in an effort to keep from ruining the brief reprieve they’ve all found in each other, he and his sister don’t have any further conversations regarding Sansa and Bran. Jon doesn’t think there’s anything more to talk about: Arya wants them safe, but she knows Jon will do what he has to do to
protect Daenerys, and nothing will change that. Instead of focusing on the places they don’t agree, he focuses on the places they do. He takes the time to join her in training when he can, surprised at how easily Needle can match Longclaw, and he brings her along with him and Dany as they walk Flea Bottom whenever he can arrange it. He knows the peace between them all is a fragile thing, but he tries to appreciate it all the same.

After Gendry and Yara leave, though, Arya begins to withdraw from him and Dany again. He’s sure it doesn’t help that he’s leaving to go North soon. The too-few days their small group laughed together wasn’t long at all, but Jon gets the feeling it was the closest to close Arya’s felt to a group of people in a long while. He senses her building loneliness. But not quite as keenly as Daenerys does.

“I know how she feels, in a way,” she tells Jon, alone in their chambers, her skin against his. “I never really knew family or home, not like she did, so the loss I felt was different. But I know how it feels to feel like you don’t belong anywhere.”

“She wants to belong in Winterfell again.”

“We all want to belong where we’re from. But home isn’t a place.”

“No,” Jon agrees, his face hidden in her hair. He smoothes his hands down her back, his heart wide in his chest. She is proof of that. He never could’ve imagined that he’d feel at home here, in the south, in King’s Landing. But he does. Because this place isn’t home. Dany is.

Daenerys is quiet for so long Jon thinks she’s drifted off to sleep, and he’s on the brink of it himself. But then she speaks again, her voice hesitant, questioning.

“Do you think she’d stay here? When you go North, I mean.”

Jon pulls back and looks down at his wife’s face. Her beauty is haunting in the dim light, her uncertainty poignant.

“Here with you?” he asks. He can’t help the way his heart migrates up his throat at the thought.

She doesn’t respond, but her lips part for a moment as if she’s going to. She exhales Shakily instead, her eyes dancing with Jon’s, her thoughts clear. He holds her face between his hands, marveling at the softness of her cheeks, the warmth of her skin.

“You want to save everyone,” he murmurs.

Sadness passes over her eyes like clouds blocking the sun. “And what’s wrong with that?”

He leans in and kisses her. Every bit of his affection and respect flows into it, and when he pulls back, he finds himself swallowed whole by emotion.

“Nothing,” he whispers. “There’s nothing wrong with that.” He kisses her again, deeper this time, his chest fit to burst open with love. “Nothing.”

She’s weightless in his arms as he kisses her: her mouth, her jaw, her neck, her shoulders, her heart. He can’t bear to stop. Can’t bear to pull away. It hits him, then. That he’s leaving her. And he’s gripped with a terror that hooks firmly into him, a terror that leaves him out of breath and frantic. He moves his mouth back to hers until she speaks, and then he pauses to listen.

“I’m not so noble,” she tells him, and he wonders if she thinks his affection is coming simply from her concern about Arya.
“You are,” he refutes, his voice low.

“No. I don’t want to be alone, either. I don’t want to be lonely, either.”

Those words feed the fear and sadness within him. He channels that desperation into his kiss, his touch. He tries to imagine waking up in the cold of Winterfell, the space beside him empty, and it’s hard not to feel as if he’s being yanked back in time to when he was younger, lost. Before he had titles. Before he had a name.

Harder to bear than that is the idea that he’ll be leaving Dany here without her home.

For the first time since their wedding, he feels lost.

VII.

His nightmares grip him like the hands of the dead, unrelenting, terrifying, and cold as ice.

In them, he’s wrenched and cleaved through a perverse series of visions, his mind jerked from one horror to the next until his chest feels crushed underneath the weight of his panic. He’s Aegon the Usurper, and all around him the floor is wet with blood, with bits of flesh, with charred skin, with ruby-soaked silver hair, and his head rings with screams— he’s Aegon the Unworthy, and his wife is sobbing at his feet, broken and bled out, begging him to leave her be, but he reaches down and lifts her up by her throat— he’s the Mad King, and Queen Rhaella begs him for mercy, her sharp cries and her agony filling the Red Keep, the taste of her blood as sharp as a blade— he’s Prince Rhaegar, and his hands are coated in blood, and Lyanna Stark’s life flows out around him, a hot, dark pool, her pale face growing still, her last words a question of their son— he’s Viserys Targaryen, and he’s got his sister by the hair, and he feels powerful then, with her crying and gasping at his feet, her terror and pain the only thing in the world that makes him feel like a king—he’s Aegon Targaryen, and he’s sinking a dagger into Daenerys Targaryen’s chest—

No.

It feels as if a knife goes through his skull as he wrenches himself from whatever horror has overtaken him. He finds himself staring at the wall of his chambers when his consciousness finally rises to the surface, his eyes dry and burning, as if they’d been open the entire time he was dreaming (dreaming?), as if he’d been staring at this wall all the while. His body shakes so hard he has a difficult time breathing, and when he moves to sit up, to try and calm down, he’s seized by fear at the sight of Dany on the other side of the bed. She’s still sleeping deeply, her silver hair flowing over the sheets, and the fear that grips him at that sight is directed at himself. He tries to move to the edge of the bed so frantically that he accidentally wrenches the blankets off of her in the process. He perches on the edge of the bed, bound by the blankets twisted around his legs, sweat pouring down his bare back— nausea climbs up his frame— his head is on fire— he can’t think—he can’t remember—

“Jon?” he hears, and then he doubles over and becomes sick all over the floor.

Everything sounds far away due to the overwhelming pounding of his pulse. He distantly hears the bed creak, distantly registers Dany’s soft hands on his shoulders. When she speaks, he can hardly process her quiet questions. He trembles until he leans forward and becomes sick again, this time violently enough that he nearly slips off the edge of the bed. She catches him around the middle, pulling him back against her chest, her panicked words a muffled, faraway noise. Stay away from me, he nearly says, afraid to look at her, afraid to touch her, afraid to hurt her. He sees Viserys’s hand wrenching her hair back, Queen Rhaella’s bruised thighs, blood blooming around the dagger in her breast—he leans over, thinking he may be sick again.
He can’t think about anything except how much pain he’s in, how scared he is— until he realizes she’s moved away from him. He doesn’t know what frightens him more: her being near him or her being far. He begins shaking again, cold without her heat against him, the cool night air freezing against his sweat-drenched skin. He blinks sweat or tears from his eyes and turns to see where she’s gone. He sees her at the door, already calling for someone in a language he doesn’t know, and he calls out to her, finally finding the strength to speak.

“No, I don’t want anyone,” he begs, and the pain still boring into his skull makes him begin to cry.

He doesn’t know how he knows it, but he knows he’s not ill. He doesn’t know what’s happened to him, but he knows it wasn’t just a nightmare. And he’s as frightened as he is pained.

She returns to his side, a fire in the dead of winter, and he lets her cradle his head to her chest. Her fingers pull through his sweat-drenched curls, and she doesn’t ask anything, but he can feel her trembling.

“I would never,” he babbles— not making any sense, and knowing that he’s not, but not being able to stop. “I would never. I would never. Not any of it, not ever. Dany, I would never. I would never.”

“I know, I know,” she soothes, and he almost believes that she does. “Are you ill? Do you need the maester?”

He can’t answer: he’s breathing shallowly again, stomach gripped once more by nausea.

“Was it a night terror?”

He thinks about the dryness of his eyes, the pain in his head, the way those visions pulled his mind apart. He is no stranger to nightmares. This was not that.

“No,” he swears. He can’t believe those things could come from his own mind. He can’t believe darkness like that could come from himself. “I don’t know what happened,” he says, growing upset again.

“It’s over now,” she comforts, but it isn’t until his heart rate has calmed enough to sync with hers and his trembling has somewhat stopped that he’s able to believe that.

She pulls him back to the sheets with her and drapes the blankets back over their legs. It takes what feels like hours to him, but gradually, he feels himself begin to sink back into his own mind. His panic dissipates. His muscles relax. He’s able to hold her to him without fear of hurting her. He’s able to breathe. Eventually, the stabbing pain in his head recedes completely, too. He thinks she must be asleep by now, but she’s not.

“What can I do?” she asks.

The horrible things he’d seen are already drifting away. They grow fuzzy, vague, until all he can remember is the smell of fire and blood and a feeling of terror.

“Just stay,” he answers, his words hidden into her hair.

She holds him tighter. He drifts off to sleep counting her heartbeats, hanging onto to each one, terrified of the moment they might stop.

VIII.

The arrow sticks solidly into the target, the firm thwack echoing around the courtyard.
“Bad night?” Arya asks dully, shooting Jon a look over her shoulder as she walks over to retrieve the arrow.

Jon leans against the crumbled remains of a stone wall, his entire body heavy with exhaustion. “You could say that.”

Arya turns back to face the target. She readjusts the arrow and holds the bow up, eying her target. “Lovers’ quarrel?”

She lets go of the bowstring. Jon watches the arrow whiz through the air and pierce the same exact spot the first arrow had. It quivers for a moment, then falls still.

“No,” Jon answers. But he doesn’t know how to explain what happened last night, so he changes the subject. “What’s your plan, Arya?”

She retrieves the arrow again. Aims again. Shoots again.

“Don’t really have one,” she admits. She looks over her shoulder at him. “What’s yours?”

He pushes off the crumbled wall and walks over to stand beside her. He passes her another arrow, and she takes it.

“I’m heading North at midday,” he says, his heart heavy.

“You sound thrilled about that,” Arya mutters, letting another arrow loose. It hits the end of the one still stuck in the target and bounces back, falling into the dirt. “The south’s made you more dragon than wolf.”

He doesn’t know what to say back to that. Maybe she’s right. He’s not sure he cares if she is. He only knows that he dreads leaving—fears it—but whatever happened last night has made him fear staying, too. Has made him fear himself. The fear is largely subconscious, and he’s able to forget about it when he’s busy thinking of other things, but it keeps creeping back into his mind in quiet moments.

He looks around them and studies the soldiers standing far off. None are watching them—Jon guesses they’ve gotten bored of watching Arya Stark show off her archery skills. He passes Arya another arrow.

“Daenerys is pregnant.”

Her hands fumble with the bowstring, letting the arrow loose earlier than she’d planned. It gives a feeble arch through the air and sticks the ground only a few steps from where they stand. She looks up at him, her lips parted and dark eyes wide.

“What?” she blurs.

“We’ve known for a while. We’re not telling anyone.”

She holds his gaze for one more stunned moment, and then she turns back to the target and lifts the bow back up.

“Can’t hide it forever,” she says.

“No. But we can make it appear that the child was conceived true.”

“An heir so soon after the wedding. The people of King’s Landing will think they’ve been well and
truly blessed,” she mutters. “All hail Queen Daenerys and King Jon of House Targaryen. Long may they reign.”

Jon says nothing back to that. He passes her arrow after arrow, watching as she fills every available space on the target. When he’s passing her the last one in the quiver, she lowers the bow to the ground and looks up at him.

“Does the queen know you’re telling me this?”

“Yes,” he answers. After their strange night, the threat of telling Arya seemed much milder that morning than it had before, and both he and Dany had been of the same mind.

“I didn’t think she trusted me much.”

“She trusts me. And I trust you. That’s enough for her.” Jon reaches out suddenly as Arya lifts the bow again. He pushes it back down. “Is that enough for you?”

The question hangs heavy in the air. After a beat, Arya sets the bow down on the ash-riddled ground. She faces him completely, her mouth set in a firm line.

“A baby,” she repeats.


“Hm,” Arya says, her tone thoughtful. “Sansa won’t like that at all.”

“The Others take Sansa. This isn’t about her and I don’t give a damn what she thinks,” Jon snaps. “This is about the future. This is about choices. What do you choose, Arya? A future of war and betrayal, of the last Starks at each other’s throats, of everything we’ve worked to rebuild being destroyed— or a future of rebirth, of growth, of stability? Of family?”

She stares. “Your family.”

“No. Our family. All of us. Or are you not my blood? Is this baby not your blood?”

She shakes her head. She appears every bit as tired as Jon feels. “What do you want from me, Jon?”

He’d planned a million ways to approach this conversation in his head, but right then, he can’t remember any of them. All that’s left is desperation and fear.

“I want you to stay here with Daenerys. I want you to look out for her. Protect them. From everything. From everyone.” Even me, if it ever came to that. If I am ever pulled from my head again like I was last night. If I ever become what I fear. But of course he doesn’t say that. He thinks Arya would think him truly mad if he did. And maybe he is. He’s felt that way all day.

Arya snorts. “The Dragon Queen hardly needs protection.”

“Everyone needs protection. Anyone can be hurt. Anyone can be killed.”

Those words mean something to her. She falls quiet, looks up towards the sky. Above them, Dany and Drogon are circling above King’s Landing, surveying the ongoing construction. Jon looks up and watches, too, arrested by the sudden wish to cry. But he won’t let himself.

“A coldhearted assassin isn’t the type of guard most men would choose for their pregnant wife,” Arya mutters, finally looking back at Jon.
He reaches out and sets his hand on her shoulder. For a moment, he can’t believe how tall she’s gotten.

“I’m not choosing a coldhearted assassin. I’m choosing Arya Stark.” Her eyes soften slightly beneath her stern brow. “For me, Arya. Do it for me. Please.”

He doesn’t mean to let his voice break. Doesn’t mean his residual pain from last night to seep into his eyes. But it does, and Arya’s thrown her arms around him before he even notices her shifting forward, as quick and quiet as she’s always been. He clutches her to him, his fear swallowing him whole as they stand there together.

“For you,” Arya finally mutters, her words muffled into his shoulder. “For you, I will.”

He hugs her tighter. “From everything. From everyone. No matter what.”

“You have my word,” she vows. She leans back. “But I won’t let her braid my hair. That’s where I draw the line.”

Jon laughs. It helps loosen the noose around his heart.

“You’ve hardly got enough to braid,” he quips. She punches his arm in response.

“Who are you taking North with you?” she asks, stepping back from him.

Jon nods vaguely towards the soldiers grouped to their right. “Some of my men. And Lord Tyrion.”

“Not Ser Davos?” Arya asks.

“No, Ser Davos is staying here,” Jon answers.

“Have you and the queen switched Hands?” Arya asks, amused.

“In a way,” he hedges. He doesn’t want to burden Arya with anymore secrets. She doesn’t need to know about the things Bran told Tyrion, the things that had turned him against Jon.

Arya looks over Jon’s shoulder, something catching her attention.

“Looks like your queen is landing. I suppose you’ll want to go spend time with her before you have to leave.”

Jon nods in agreement, casting his eyes to the roof of the Maidenvault. Drogon’s massive body is impossible to miss.

“Thank you,” Jon tells his little sister. She nods and lifts the bow back up. He can hear the sound of her arrows hitting the target for half the walk back to the Maidenvault, to Dany.
The Wolf

Chapter Notes

I know this is ridiculously long...and this is after cutting four scenes. I hope your eyes forgive me!

My continued thanks to all who commented and left kudos! Your kind thoughts keep me going through writer's block etc.-- it means the world to know you're enjoying this!

x

The flashback at the start of this chapter takes place during 8x02 (this part specifically: https://youtu.be/lpkFJSYdZG1?t=111)

I.

“That’s what death is, isn’t it? Forgetting. Being forgotten.”

The heat of the roaring fire had been burning steadily into Tyrion, but at Samwell Tarly’s words, he feels the race of a chill down his spine. In the brief moment of silence that falls over the room, thoughtful and terrible, his eyes can’t help but seek out his queen. Her surety recedes in her eyes; he sees her look down at the table and inhale the slightest bit in fear.

Samwell Tarly’s words make sense. Tyrion listens, absorbing, thinking. When Sam trails off, and Bran does, too, it’s only Tyrion who knows what to ask next.

“How will he find you?”

Bran turns his hand over wordlessly and pulls up his sleeve, revealing what looks to Tyrion in the firelight as four long scars on his forearm. After a split second, he recognizes it as fingermarks. The Night King’s.

“He always knows where I am,” Bran answers.

As this unsettling statement settles over the room, everyone rushes to provide solutions or ideas. Tyrion’s always felt that fear and stress can be sometimes a great motivator for great ideas, but he can’t help but wonder tonight whether the fear and stress have reached an unproductive point. Jon wants to hide Bran in the crypt; Bran wants to wait in the Godswood; Sansa and Arya want Bran to remain protected; Theon Greyjoy wants to guard Bran with the Ironborn. Bran, the greatest cyvasse piece— but Tyrion isn’t sure why. Still isn’t sure if he believes it. He lets them make their moves anyway.

After deciding where Bran will be, he secures his place at the start of the battle: signaling the lighting of the trenches alongside Ser Davos. His queen had been quiet for most of the meeting, staring gravely at the map in front of her as she thought, only looking away to gauge Jon Snow’s reaction to various comments and plans (and he, her, though Tyrion tries not to look. Tries not to see. He tells himself that method has worked well enough thus far.)

Her voices rings out around them now, authoritative and sharp. “Ser Davos is perfectly capable of waving a torch on his own. You’ll be in the crypt.”
Nobody meets his eyes except for Varys, stood just behind their queen, his eyes narrowing shrewdly. Tyrion glances around the room— he can’t help it. He’s curious to see who agrees with her. Who also thinks him worthless in battle despite the things he’d done in King’s Landing against Stannis, things he’d never gotten true credit for. Sansa’s brow raises just slightly, almost as if she’s surprised by the queen’s words. Arya inclines her head in agreement, though Tyrion gets the impression it’s a subconscious action she’s not even aware of.

And Jon Snow. Tyrion feels rage, shame— a boiling pot of emotion at the look on Jon Snow’s face. He agrees. His eyes are soft, free of conflict. He watches their queen steadily. And he, fierce and ready, will be going off into battle alongside their queen. He, Tyrion knows, will likely be the one to overcome the Night King. He’ll be the hero, the one the Queen credits with saving mankind. He’ll be the last one to love her. Hadn’t Tyrion promised her there would be others? Hadn’t Tyrion meant that? (Hadn’t he been talking of himself?).

He feels sick, but he masters that reaction. He looks back at his queen. “Your Grace, I have fought before, I can do it again. Alongside the men and women risking their lives.” Alongside you.

She looks away from him dismissively. He hates that: hates that she’s not meeting his eyes. Hates that she’s already made up her mind.

“There are thousands of them and only one of you,” she tells him. “You can’t fight as well as they can, but you can think better than any of them. You’re here because of your mind: if we survive, I’ll need it.”

His shame is a heavy weight on his shoulders. She looks back at him, and for a second, he’s nearly an idiot. He nearly asks: is that the only reason I’m here? My mind? Do I mean little else to you?

But he doesn’t. He nods. Even though he feels like other pawn being pushed around the board. Even though he knows his mind hasn’t been much use to her in the recent months. If that’s the reason he’s here, when will she send him away? If that’s all his worth is based in, how much longer does he have at Queen Daenerys’s side?

Jon and the others decide that he and Dany must make protecting Bran from dragonback their main priority, and Tyrion doesn’t permit himself to provide input on that. Privately, he thinks their two best weapons— the dragons and their riders— should be their greatest shield: they can do the most damage, make the greatest impact on the ground. But he’d stopped trusting his own judgement long ago. He didn’t know what to make of that uncertainty. All his life, he’d been the clever one. His mind had never failed him, even when everything else had. When everyone else had. What was he now? Who was he now? The Hand of the Queen?

For how much longer?

A Lannister? Likely not for much longer, either— if he’d ever really been.

Those thoughts slow his mind down and trap him. He realizes he’s one of the last left in the room. Except for Bran Stark.

He’s quiet, too. Stuck in the trap of his mind, too. Or perhaps the maze of his mind, the citadel of his mind: Tyrion can’t imagine the vastness of it, the greatness. The ability to know whatever you needed to know at any moment— the strength of knowledge that limitless already being inside of you.

He’s a bit jealous of him, too.
“Do you need help?” he asks him, wondering if he’s been forgotten and left in here (like Tyrion feels he’s being).

“No,” Bran says. Tyrion can’t read anything on his face or in his voice. Despite his own pain, he can’t help but feel curious.

“You’ve had a strange journey,” he comments, testing. Waiting.

“Stranger than most,” Bran affirms.

Tyrion can’t imagine a story stranger. Can’t imagine a story better apt at enthralling him, in getting his mind off the things he doesn’t want to think about—the things he hasn’t wanted to think about since that fateful night on that boat.

He grabs a chair and pulls it over to Bran. “I’d like to hear about it.”

“It’s a long story.”

“If only we were trapped in a castle, in the middle of no where, with no where to go,” Tyrion points out.

Bran doesn’t smile or make any indication that he’s heard what Tyrion’s said. But he looks at him. For what feels like a long while, his face expressionless, his eyes faraway. Right when Tyrion’s certain he’s not going to say anything at all, he glances towards the door. Tyrion turns, too, but there’s nobody there. When Bran speaks next, he realizes that was the point: Bran was making sure they were alone.

“You’re not the only one to feel this way about her,” Bran tells him, and Tyrion feels as if someone has just grabbed his heart in their fist and yanked it down. He doesn’t know what his face shows, but when he meets Bran’s eyes again, he realizes there’s no one on the planet it would be as fruitless to lie to as the boy in front of him. He makes no effort to mask his pain.

“Yes, I’m just one of many unfortunate fools,” Tyrion mutters. He rises from the chair and crosses over to the far wall. His hand trembles a bit as he pours himself a glass of wine. Bran hasn’t moved even a centimeter when he returns back to his seat. “I am well aware of that fact.”

“In some ways,” Bran agrees. He turns to look out the window; the pause between his first statement and the statement that follows is awkward, off-balanced. Tyrion drinks from the goblet in his hand to fill the space. “In other ways, though, you have a role more important than any other.”

He’d once thought so. But right now, looking at Bran Stark, he doesn’t believe it.

“I wish it were true, but I fear the Queen is growing tired of my mistakes,” he admits. “One of my next mistakes will be my last. And I can’t blame her for that.”

His next sip of wine is closer to a gulp. It burns his chest going down.

“Sometimes the worst mistake a man can make is doing nothing. Saying nothing,” Bran comments. Tyrion feels a shock shoot through him when Bran turns suddenly and meets his eyes. “They love each other.”

Who they is is understood. Tyrion needs no further information. His heart sinks even lower; he can’t believe it’s even possible for it to. For a second, he’s back on that boat in the damp, shifting corridor, helpless to do anything to stop what’s unraveling behind Daenerys’s door. Helpless to block it out—and helpless to walk away, too. Doomed to bear witness to what feels like the
shattering of the earth.

Tyrion’s quiet for a longer stretch than would be acceptable in conversation with anyone else, but Bran hardly seems to notice.

“Yes,” Tyrion finally mutters. When he lifts his goblet, he’s frustrated to find it already dry. “They’re good at a great many things, but hiding that is not one of them.”

“It’s a horrible thing,” Bran declares, his voice distant. Tyrion looks at him, startled. Bran meets his eyes. “You know that.”

It’s not a question. It’s an indisputable fact, one Tyrion’s been grappling with for over a month now.

“Yes…I do,” he admits. “Passion and politics…never a good mix. I’ve always known that.”

There’s a bitter taste in his mouth that he knows has little to do with the alcohol.

“Yet there’s quite a lot you don’t know. And quite a lot that I do,” Bran says. He turns to the fire. “It’s time for you to know some of it.”

Tyrion’s arrested with longing: he wants to know all of it. He wants to know everything there is to know. He can think of a thousand questions, a million mysteries— he would’ve given anything for even five minutes inside Bran Stark’s head.

But he must be content with what Bran is willing to give him. And what he gets isn’t what he’s expecting.

“Fire cannot kill a dragon. But another dragon can.”

Tyrion waits, hoping that’s not all Bran will say. Hoping that’s not the only glimpse at secret knowledge he’ll be afforded. He forces himself not to talk, to remain quiet, to keep waiting. His patience is paid off.

“Daenerys Targaryen is a true Targaryen. Like true Targaryens, she’s respected for her strength, her tenacity. Like true Targaryens, she’ll be her own downfall.”

Tyrion is unsure what to say to that. He wants to get more wine desperately, but he can’t seem to move from the chair, can’t seem to tear his eyes from Bran’s faraway expression.

“She will love and love and burn with it— and then that love will pierce her open. She’ll lose herself, and after that, her life.”

The popping of the wood in the fire seems louder, the crackling of the flames bolder. Tyrion leans back in his seat weakly, his hands gripping the arms.

“…I don’t understand,” he admits, feeling foolish. Frightened. Stupid.

When Bran merges their gaze, Tyrion wants to look away.

“The loss of great love will lead to a destruction of all she is, all she stands for, all she’s built. Soon after, great betrayal follows. Betrayal at the hands of the one who loves her. Betrayal that will cost her her life. Only a dragon can kill a dragon.”

Historically speaking, it’s not true, and for a stupid moment, Tyrion wants to argue semantics with Bran Stark— the Three-Eyed Raven. Plenty of things other than other dragons have killed dragons before, and many people without the dragon’s blood in their veins have killed those with it.
But he senses trying to argue with Bran would be like trying to argue proper grammar with someone speaking Lhazar: just as he knows nothing of the Lhazareen language, he knows nothing of what Bran sees.

“What have you seen? Who betrays her?”

If Tyrion can find this out, he can tell Daenerys. He can show her that he’s still useful, that her faith in him wasn’t pointless, that he can still provide value to her in a way that nobody else can. That he loves her.

“Who do you think?” Bran asks him, and Tyrion sees Jon Snow in his mind at once. “You must stop it.”

“How?” Tyrion begs. “What precisely is going to happen? I cannot stop something if I don’t know what I’m looking for, if I don’t know what to do—”

“I am telling you what to do. You must keep them apart at all costs. You must do what you have to do—say what you have to say—to divide them,” Bran orders. With only the flickering light from the fire, Bran’s eyes appear all-black for a moment. It frightens Tyrion, and for the first time, he doesn’t see Bran Stark at all. He doesn’t see a human at all. “There has never been anything more important.”

Tyrion looks back down into his empty goblet. His chest rings with emptiness. He thinks about the morning following that fateful night on the ship, of Jon and Daenerys standing together on the deck, suddenly appearing to Tyrion as a formidable unit, two halves of one powerful whole. He had known they were trouble then, but he hadn’t realized how much.

“He’ll kill her?” Tyrion hears himself ask. His voice cracks; it nearly blends with the cracking coming from the fireplace.

“He’ll destroy her. In every way a person can be destroyed. And there are many ways.”

Tyrion’s eyes close. He feels dread curl heavy at the pit of his stomach.

“Why would Jon Snow do that?” Tyrion asks. He looks back at Bran. “He loves her. Why would he do that?”

Bran’s eyebrows lift just slightly. It’s the most expressive Tyrion’s seen his face since they arrived North.

“Why would I lie?” Bran answers.

Tyrion’s hands shake earnestly as he goes to pour himself another glass of wine. For a time, faced with this new threat, he forgets the army of the dead exists at all.

II.

When Tyrion first wakes inside his tent, he assumes it’s the distant conversation of the Dothraki riders that’s torn him from his dreams.

He rolls over with a muffled groan, his entire body aching. He feels every year of his life right then, and in the dramatics of being torn so early from his sleep, he thinks maybe he doesn’t have many years left.

He tries to drift back to sleep, knowing he’ll regret it if he wakes this early once they’ve continued
their grueling journey on the Kingsroad, but he soon realizes what has woken him: broken, poorly-accented Valryian, so unintelligible that Tyrion can’t distinguish what variation it’s meant to be, coming from somewhere outside his tent.

It only takes him a second to realize it’s Jon Snow. The pronunciation is so terrible that Tyrion can’t determine a word of what he’s saying, though he’s certain his Astapori Valyrian vocabulary must be limited to the simple words and phrases that Tyrion himself knows. Though he can’t determine exactly what he’s saying, he can hear the tenor of his voice. And he knows something isn’t right.

Tyrion pulls himself from his tent, never pausing to ask himself if it’s the right thing to do or not. His knowledge of the role Jon Snow could come to play in Daenerys’s downfall has soured his opinion on the man in many ways, but sometimes, Tyrion can’t help but see him as that lost, bastard boy he’d journeyed to the Wall with. And now is one of those times. He steps out into the night and stares at Jon Snow, standing just outside his own tent that’s besides Tyrion’s, and he can’t help but feel concern at the way the man (boy, he looks now) is trembling.

“Your Grace?” Tyrion calls. He approaches Jon and the three Unsullied men. All three are Grey Worm’s most trusted soldiers so he doesn’t assume anything is wrong on the part of their conduct, but something is afoot. Jon Snow looks miserable, his face haggard with pain, his frame shaky. “Your Grace?” Tyrion tries again, but Jon doesn’t seem to hear him. “Jon?”

Jon looks down at him. He reacts oddly to Tyrion’s presence, as if Tyrion had just walked upon him doing something shameful: he reaches up to rub nervously at his eyes and looks away, physically stepping a few paces away from Tyrion. Tyrion turns to Red Fly.

“Is everything okay?” he asks. He knows enough High Valyrian to get by reasonably well whilst reading and writing, but he still struggles somewhat with the various dialects of Low Valyrian. Still — he certainly gets by better than Jon seems to be.

Red Fly answers him quickly, his answer short and so quiet it’s half-unintelligible. Tyrion is able to make out Kingsroad, before, and sunrise. He glances back at Jon. Jon’s looking far off, his hand still rubbing at his forehead.

“We’re leaving before sunrise?” Tyrion asks Jon. Jon doesn’t face him. “We didn’t stop until well after dark. Don’t you think we should rest a bit longer?”

Jon— King Jon, Tyrion has to remind himself, as the man looks everything but kingly right now—ignores Tyrion’s question and turns back to Red Fly. When he begins to speak again, slow and with much struggle, Tyrion realizes he’s not even speaking the Unsullied’s dialect of Low Valyrian at all. Tyrion’s ears pick up a few words of fractured High Valyrian, and with a surge of sudden amusement (and embarrassment on Jon’s part), Tyrion realizes Jon’s speaking using a particular informal pronoun that Tyrion knows is saved specifically for lovers. In his studies as a boy, he had run into it only once in an old poetry anthology written in High Valyrian. When he’d asked his tutors what the poem meant, his tutors had been brusque, and he’d been given a ‘better-suited’ text for a boy his age and sent on his way to continue his studies. Jon has, no doubt, been given no real lessons in Valyrian at all, and is instead absorbing language in a relatively tried and true, albeit long-winding, way: in bed with a woman.

He can’t help but laugh. He doesn’t mean to. It’s not exactly funny, what with Jon clearly in pain and upset about something, but he laughs all the same. A thought comes, unbidden: If only Missandei were here, she’d laugh, too. His laughter quickly dims and dies out.

Both Jon and Red Fly turn slowly to Tyrion; momentarily, he thinks one of them might strike him. He sobers up quickly enough.
“My apologies, Your Grace,” he says, and then, with some struggle to keep from smiling, he provides Jon with the right pronoun in Low Valyrian. Jon’s brow is already furrowed in pain, but it furrows even more.

“What?” he demands impatiently.

“Nothing,” Tyrion says, reluctantly letting it go. He’d like to tell Jon that his language tutor needs to be a bit less personal and a bit more well-rounded and methodical in her lessons, or any other host of jests, but it’s been ages since he and Jon were at a place where they could possibly jest together, and now is certainly not going to be the time to start again. “Are you ill?”

“No.” He turns back to Red Fly. Tyrion has to suffer through another couple of minutes of him giving marching orders in what must amount to Targaryen pillowtalk. Red Fly, for his benefit, either doesn’t realize it, finds Jon’s language skills so abhorrent he can’t even make out anything he’s saying, or has amazing control over his expressions because he remains stoic and serious, nodding and interjecting only with careful, pointed questions.

Tyrion gathers, once Red Fly and his two soldiers walk off, that they are leaving before sunrise after all.

“The queen’s been teaching you High Valyrian, I see,” Tyrion comments. He can’t help himself. He’s beginning to feel a bit giddy from exhaustion and lack of sleep.

“No. Just picking a bit up here and there,” he dismisses. He’s back to rubbing over his eyes with a grimace.

“You’ve got a headache,” Tyrion realizes. “Too much wine?”

It’s also a joke. He hasn’t seen Jon partake in wine or ale once the entire trip. He’s eaten very little, too.

He turns to walk away. Tyrion follows.

“Perhaps it’s from all this nonstop riding we’ve been doing with such little sleep or rest,” Tyrion muses, an air of derision latent in his words.

“Watch your tone,” Jon growls. He returns to the fire closest to their tents and reaches for a stick so he can stoke the angry logs. They’re full of embers burning so bright it hurts to look, and when Jon pushes one of the logs, hundreds burst into the air like fiery snowflakes headed back up to the clouds. His hand still trembles.

“Sleep would help,” Tyrion persists. He knows things will look very bad for himself if King Jon turns up dead on the Kingsroad. He tries to imagine what the queen’s reaction would be. He thinks it likely he’d be slow-roasted.

“I don’t want sleep,” Jon mutters. But the way he rests his forehead in his hands tells Tyrion the opposite. “I just want to be at Winterfell so we can leave Winterfell, so we can go back.”

“Back to your wife,” Tyrion comments bitterly. He’s not sure why he does. Maybe just to feel his own heart ache at the word. Maybe to be a masochist, to remind himself the odds stacked against himself, against Daenerys.

“Yes. Back to my bloody wife,” Jon says, catching onto Tyrion’s tone again. He sets the stick he’d been using back on the ground. He presses his trembling hands to his thighs and crouches to perch on a particularly large log resting just beside the fire ring; Tyrion wonders how he can bear to be so
close to the flames. “We shouldn’t have gone,” he says suddenly, riddled with anxiety.

Tyrion’s surprised at his forthright words. They’ve been traveling nearly two weeks now, and in all that time, Jon has only said maybe ten words to him that didn’t have to do with politics, strategy, or tent placement.

“The queen is well-protected,” Tyrion says. *Because you’re separated from her. She’s safer now than she was before.*

He bows his head and runs his hands through his hair, visibly agitated. Something is eating him inside-out, but Tyrion has no idea how to determine what that something is.

“Are you worrying for the baby?” he wonders, lowering his voice to little more than a whisper.

Jon doesn’t answer. He seems momentarily overcome by something—some fear, maybe, or some horrible memory— and he rocks slightly where he sits, hands gripping tighter to his hair. It alarms Tyrion. Jon hasn’t been right for most the journey, but it seems to him that it’s reaching a point that goes beyond simple anxiety over parting from his new wife and kingdom.

“When we stop at Castle Cerwyn, you should have the Maester look over you.”

Jon doesn’t answer. He rises abruptly, and before Tyrion can think of anything else to say, he turns and walks away in what appears to be a random direction. With his back to Tyrion, he appears to be nothing more than a stranger walking unsteadily through the night. And looking after him, his heart chilling, Tyrion can only think about the question he’d asked Bran what feels like ages ago now. *Why would Jon Snow do that? He loves her. Why would he do that?*

_Maybe,_ he thinks now, the thought dark and small and frightened, _it’s not Jon Snow anymore who does._ _Maybe it’s this unstable, tormented version of him._

Tyrion goes back to his tent, but he doesn’t sleep.

**III.**

“Is this really all queens do all day? My sister tried to make it seem much more glamorous than this when we were children.”

Daenerys looks over at Arya. She’s still leaning against the wall in the same place she’d been all morning, her expression one of boredom as she examines the never-ending line of people queued outside of the Maidenvault hall. Dany’s seen nearly three dozen people already and it’s not even halfway to midday, and there seems to be so sign that the influx of people will let up. Dany doesn’t mind: this had been her and Ser Davos’s compromise after he expressed his deep concern over her walking the streets of King’s Landing with part of her forces gone and Jon away North.

_I walked amongst my people in Essos long before I had an army as vast as I do now. Long before I had a King,_ Dany had argued, affronted. *Certainly, Your Grace— and still, I wonder if it wouldn’t be better to err on the side of caution for the sake of the babe? It’s obvious that your armies are thinner now than they were before, what with some North and some in Essos, and it’s common knowledge that the king is gone elsewhere; if someone wanted to make a move against you, this would be the time they would do it.*

She hadn’t agreed entirely with his risk assessment—she felt he was severely underemphasizing Drogon, who was often circling the skies above wherever Dany was—but she did agree that this would be the ideal time politically for some nefarious-intentioned usurper to strike against her. If someone were to kill her, the pandemonium that would ensue here without most of her armies and
the presence her co-ruler would be significant enough that one might actually pull off a successful coup, albeit a temporary one.

In the end, her child was more important than her pride. She’d agreed not to walk the streets again until her baby was born, but she refused to stop meeting with her people. This makeshift audience chamber was the compromise, and if Dany thought she got restless at times holed up in here, it was nothing compared to how Jon’s sister thought of it. She often reminded Dany of a caged animal.

“You can take your leave, if you wish,” Dany reminds Arya. She gestures out the opened doors at the long line of commonfolk. “You know what you will be missing.”

“Yes. The commonfolk requesting help, blessings, or luck, and perhaps a few more strange men who smell like old cheese who ask to touch your hair.”

Dany’s lips quirk up in amusement. She inclines her head. “As I said: you may leave, if you wish.” Arya doesn’t budge. “Or, if you like, you may stay for the remaining cheese-men.”

“Well I don’t know where else I’ll find entertainment in this city.”

“Perhaps I’ll surprise you and let one of them actually touch my hair later today. My gift to you, to appease your boredom.”

Arya turns to look at her, scowling. Her hand twitches towards her hip, towards the sword Jon gave her when she was just a young girl. “Don’t you dare let them approach. I swore a vow to my brother.”

Atoqqo steps back into the front hall, bringing with him a tired-looking woman and her young child.

“Yes, and you take your vow very seriously, I know,” Dany says to Arya, and then she turns her focus to the woman. Beside her, Lora, a Flea Bottom girl of fifteen years, steps up.

“Daenerys Stormborn of the House Targaryen, the First of Her Name, Queen of the Andals and the First Men, Protector of the Seven Kingdoms, the Mother of Dragons, the Khaleesi of the Great Grass Sea, the Unburnt, the Breaker of Chains,” Lora introduces. Dany hears Arya sigh. “Your Grace, this is Camielle and her son.”

“What can House Targaryen do for you, Camielle?”

The woman steps up after shooting a fearful, sidelong glance at Atoqqo. She stops where two Unsullied are standing, just a few yards from the seat Dany’s in. Her son leans listlessly against her heavy skirts and looks blankly up at Dany. Dany thinks, with a surge of unhappiness, that he doesn’t look well at all.

“Your Grace, my boy, Tomas, was in the sickhouse, taken with fever. I removed him before he was well because he was bitten nonstop by the fleas and vermin that run amongst the ruins. He was bitten so many times the healers said he was suffering from low-blood sickness, and he’s not the only one.”

Dany sits straighter, though her heart inches down. She turns her full focus to the little boy. He’s wearing an oversized tunic with long-sleeves, but Dany thinks she can make out what looks like bite marks on his hands. It’s quiet in the hall: she can feel every eye chained on her.

“Might I see his arms?” she requests.

Camielle hurries to comply. “Yes, of course, Your Grace.”
She rolls her son’s sleeves up, and before she’s even got half his left arm exposed, Dany stands. Her footsteps echo against the stone floor as she walks down towards the woman and her son; her guards edge forward with her, but she ignores them. She stops right in front of Tomas. He looks up at her, his arms bare, bite marks and scratches covering his skin. His eyes are wide. Haunting. Daenerys kneels down slowly until she’s eye-to-eye with the boy. He stares at her, his lips parting in something akin to awe.

“When did these happen, Tomas?” she asks him, casting her eyes back to his arms.

He looks down at his own arms, and then he looks back up. “Every night I was there,” he answers.

“I took him out of the sickhouse this morning,” Camielle supplies.

Dany’s eyes close for a brief moment as pain and anger shoot through her. She gives herself one moment to feel it, and then she stands back up. Straight, firm— a queen. But inside, her resolve is quaking. Inside, she’s consumed with guilt and uncertainty. She turns towards the front of the Hall where Ser Davos is seated.

“Ser Davos, I paid the Head Builder in full to repair and restore the structure we established as a sickhouse, correct? Eight days ago, if I remember correctly.”

Ser Davos rises. “Yes, Your Grace.”

Dany’s still looking at the boy and his mother. The longer she sees those bite marks, the sicker she feels.

“And remind me— when did he say the problem would be remediated?”

“He said it was a quick fix, Your Grace. Five days at most.”

“And I instructed him to make whatever necessary repairs he must to ensure an agreeable standard of living?”

“Correct,” Ser Davos nods, though of course, Daenerys knows well what she said.

“And has he sent us the completion report?”

“Yes, Your Grace. Three days ago. He reported the structure was repaired in full and that the living conditions were acceptable.”

Dany reaches out and takes Tomas’s hands in hers. She lifts his arms gently and steps to the side so Ser Davos can see him. She can feel rage kindling in the center of her chest.

“I do not call this acceptable.”

“No. Nor would I,” Ser Davos agrees.

Dany softly releases Tomas’s hands and looks up at Camielle. “I offer you my deepest apologies. I can assure you the problem will be dealt with at once. Please let Dakho escort you and Tomas to the other sickhouse; if that one is not to your liking, come straight back to me.”

She stands in the middle of the room and waits until Dakho has escorted both mother and child out. Ser Davos steps down as she turns to follow.

“Your Grace—”
She interrupts him. “I’ll see it for myself.”

It’s Arya who blocks her path, stepping boldly into it, expressionless. Dany’s anger shows on her face before she can stop it, though Jon’s sister hardly winces in the heat of it.

“A vermin, disease-infested sickhouse is not an appropriate venue for you: not ever, but particularly not now,” Ser Davos points out. “It’s full of the sick even if these claims of vermin aren’t true, though they look to be.”

Dany turns to face Ser Davos. She knows, beneath her anger, sorrow lurks, but it’s pressed down too far to feel.

“And yet we’re leaving sick children in there! If it’s not fit for me, it’s not fit for sick children and babies!”

“We’re not leaving sick children in there for a bloody moment longer,” Ser Davos shoots back, and Dany realizes he’s just as angry as she is about it. Strangely, that calms her rage rather than incites it. She feels the pressure in her chest ease. In Ser Davos’s eyes, she sees a twin horror to the one she feels, one that tells her he, too, is going to do whatever must be done to remedy this. “I’ll send for the Head Builder now so we can speak with him. In the meantime, we can move all the sick to a new location. We’ve just finished the new sept; that will do for now.”

“If the Builder has willingly ignored conditions and deceived me for the sake of greed and laziness, I’ll have his wages recollected and his reputation ruined. And if any child has died at his hand, I’ll have him killed.”

“As is your right,” Ser Davos says, unflinching. “As would I.”

The ringing of the lunch bell gathers the attention of most everyone queued up outside the Maidenvault hall; Dany, Ser Davos, and Arya turn to watch the people head towards the closest meal cart, save for a handful who remain.

“We should all leave to break our fast,” Ser Davos says. “Before they queue up again.”

Daenerys turns back to her simple chair— her complicated throne.

“Those who didn’t leave to lunch need me more than food. So I will stay,” she answers. “You two may go.”

She sits back in the chair. Ser Davos and Arya hesitate for only one moment before they retake their previous places, too.

“Go eat, Arya,” Daenerys says wearily.

Arya looks at her across the room, and for a second, her eyes remind Dany of Jon’s so deeply that she feels pain well up inside her. The intensity of his absence hits her all at once, complete and brutal, and Dany has to turn to look out the window to keep tears from forming. In the place of thoughts like it will be months until I see him again, it will be months until I touch him again, it will be months until I hear his voice again, she repeats her litany of titles on a loop, trying to gather strength from them. Lately, she’s felt a bit like she’s only pretending to be queen. Playing a child’s make-believe game. The nightmares and fear that plague her at night only make it worse.

“I think I’ll stay, if it pleases Your Grace,” Arya comments, and not for the first time, Dany wonders how Arya can infuse such cheek into such outwardly-proper words.
She thinks of ordering Arya to leave. She knows she’s well within her rights to. She could force her to go eat, even if she doesn’t want to.

But that would mean she’d take her leave. And Dany’s getting used to her steady presence. In many ways, it’s all that keeps her from feeling alone.

“I suppose it does,” Daenerys says, pretending to think hard on it beforehand.

Arya leans back against the wall. “Let’s get on with it, then.”

And get on with it they do, with Daenerys handling multiple new crises and meeting with an indeterminable number of people before dusk falls. Beyond snacking intermittently on a tray of breads, fruit, and cheese, she’s had no meal, and she’s flooded with anxiety that night when she’s faced with accepting one from the kitchens. Her afternoon tray was different: it was food for not only her, but also for whomever remained at her side as they met with the people, and she hardly had time to think about what she was snacking as she did. The meal that’s brought to her once she returns to the quiet of her room is specifically for her, and because of that, she can’t get herself to eat it. She sits with her stomach clenched in hunger, the smell of the stew both enticing and disgusting, her fingers pulling the buttery bread apart restlessly. Her head aches. There’s nothing to be afraid of, she tells herself, but there is. There’s a great many things to be afraid of. Dany has always known that.

The tray sits in her room and taunts her until a handmaid finally removes it. Dany had gotten on well-enough in the bustle of the day, but at nightfall, her kingdom quiet, she can only focus on the lurking shadows. She takes the bath drawn for her, but she grips her knees the entire time, unable to relax fully even as Ezhi pours warm, lavender-scented water over her hair and shoulders. The nights bring a sense of foreboding Dany can’t name, a nameless fear that grips her. She had thought the first couple of nights it was simply the pain of Jon’s absence, but tonight, it feels bigger than that. More powerful than that.

She winces as Ezhi massages her scalp with a bar of sandalwood and rose soap. Her head aches so much that any touch to her hair hurts. She shies away from her touch, caring little if her hair isn’t washed properly.

“Your head will hurt less if you eat more,” Ezhi tells her in Dothraki. It’s a respectful, gentle admonition, and Dany doesn’t fault her for it. She gently parts Dany’s hair above her wound, though it’s not her wound that’s hurting her: the pain seems to have wrapped around her entire skull in a vice grip, rather than simply being localized at the site of her injury. “It’s healing much better.”

“Thanks to you,” Dany tells her. She doesn’t bother telling her that her wound’s healing has done little for the pain that comes at night. That, it seems, only gets worse with time.

They’re quiet as Ezhi washes the soap from Dany’s hair. Dany feels little comfort in the warmth of the water, but when Ezhi holds the bath linens out for her, she doesn’t want to stand to take them. She doesn’t want her to go. Doesn’t want to be alone.

“Just a bit longer,” she says quietly.

Ezhi sits at the edge of the bathtub. Dany remains there, possessed by her fear, until the water is ice. When she finally goes to bed, she wakes at the turn of every hour, her head on fire, feeling as if she’s struggling against something she can’t name. She thinks it may be herself.

And when she’s so tired, so pained, that she can only give in to the sleep clinging at the edges of her brain, her nightmares are vivid and terrible. In them, she’s gripped with labor pains: the intense, twisting pain squeezes at her abdomen, her thighs, her groin. She cries out, but it does little to help.
Nothing helps. She fists her hands on the sheets and she calls for help, for someone, anyone, but she’s entirely alone.

Until she’s not. Her pain mounts and localizes, shifting from twisting agony to sharp, piercing pressure, and then she feels her child slide from her, flowing out in a river of blood. She’s dizzy as she leans between her own legs and lifts her infant up, but her dizziness doesn’t stop her from seeing. From understanding.

Scales, flaky and damaged. Bones twisted at odd angles. A mouth full of worms. A cry that sounds like a howl.

As Dany presses her lips to her babe’s bloody, terrible face, the child bursts into flames in her arms. All she has left to nurse is bones.

And when she finally wakes, she feels different.

It’s the first time the fear follows her around in the daylight, too.

IV.

At Castle Cerwyn, Jon wakes to the sound of Daenerys’s screams.

He’s standing in the chill of the room, his hand on Longclaw, before he realizes the sound was only in his nightmares. Before he remembers he’s the one that caused it.

During a feast hosted by House Hornwood, he has to leave the Great Hall to vomit outside in the snow, the pain in his head so great he sees strange colors in front of his eyes and he can’t keep even water down. His Northern soldiers joke with him about his ale consumption, and Jon is so frustrated, so hopeless, that he nearly cries.

He gives into Lord Tyrion’s nonstop harassment before departing Hornwood and allows their Maester to look over him, but the Maester tells him he’s in excellent health besides pushing himself too hard, and that a couple decent meals and restful night’s sleep will restore him back to full health. Jon looks at him and struggles to explain the fact that he can’t sleep. That sleep is the problem. When he’s finally able to voice that, he’s told it’s the stress of being king, and he’s given a special tea to make him sleep through the night.

He tries it that next night, the last night before they’ll be at Winterfell. But he wakes up screaming (to the fright of his own men), feeling paralyzed inside his own mind, and for the first time, the terrors he saw in his sleep don’t fade from his brain for hours. He tosses the tea into the fireplace and will accept no further help from the maester.

By the time Winterfell looms ahead of them, Jon is so beaten down that he is filled with relief at the sight of it. For a moment, he can’t remember why he didn’t want to return. He can’t remember why this stopped being home.

But then he sees the deserters, the bannermen. They’re a much smaller force than the men Jon brought along with him— which isn’t even a third of his and Daenerys’ total forces— but Jon can’t help but take their very presence as a threat. They watch him as he enters Winterfell. Jon never expected to be treated as a king, but this feels very far from a king’s welcome.

His sister steps forward to greet him as they approach the walls. Her face is harder than he remembers it being.

“Our men may enter,” she tells him, looking at the portion of Jon’s army made up of Northmen.
“The Dragon Queen’s army will remain outside the walls.”

Jon’s heart grows hard. He stands taller despite how ill he feels, how ill he knows he must look. “The queen’s army is my army. They are all our men— the queen’s and mine. They will be permitted inside.”

He hadn’t expected to be challenged so soon upon arrival. Sansa looks at him, and he looks at Sansa. In his pain, he feels fierce, feral. He feels as if he could easily withdraw Longclaw right now if his sister utters another word against his will. That should frighten him. It doesn’t.

But she smiles suddenly, though it’s thin and tense.


He’s stiff as she leans in to embrace him. He catches her arms, holding her back.

“I’m not,” he tells her, stepping back from her. He nods at Red Fly, giving him the order to move their men in. He can feel Sansa’s eyes on him as he heads towards the crypts, and he thinks to himself that if she follows him, he may have her arrested (so great is his annoyance, so great is his need to be alone).

But she doesn’t. And once he’s alone in the damp, cold crypt, he sinks down to the earthen floor and presses his forehead against the statue of Lyanna Stark. The cold stone soothes the sharp edges of his headache, enough so that he thinks he may just stay down here until someone comes to fish him out, receiving empty, lifeless comfort from this statue as long as he can. It’s the only comfort his mother has ever been able to give him.

_He never meant to hurt you_, Jon thinks, the words weaving roughly through his thoughts like crooked stitches. It holds nothing together: nothing is cohesive. Least of all him. _He loved you. He loved you. He didn’t know you would die having me. He loved you. It wasn’t his fault. He never meant to cause you harm. He loved you._

Entwined with these thoughts are the horrible visions, the things that have been plaguing his deteriorating mind every night. He thinks of Rhaegar’s face— of his own face. He thinks of Rhaegar’s bloody hands— his own bloody hands.

_I’m scared_, he wants to tell his mother.

But she is nothing but stone. And soon, the heat from his head warms the coolness that had once brought him relief, and he has no comfort left to find.

V.

He sleeps fitfully and sends for his siblings as soon as the sun rises. He’s brought his meal in the Great Hall, but he eats little of it. He’s left in rare quiet while he waits for Sansa and Bran; he spends it thinking of Dany. He’s forbidden Lord Tyrion from leaving Red Fly’s sight— to prevent Tyrion from speaking with Sansa or Bran without Jon being present— but he allowed him to send a raven south first thing to let Dany know they’d arrived in Winterfell safely. Jon wants to hear back from her right now— he wants to know she’s okay. Tyrion assured him he’d quickly know if she wasn’t, but the feeling of dread that Jon can’t shake makes him paranoid.

Thinking of Dany is all that helps: he’s able, in the light of morning, to forget the horrible visions from his sleep, and instead, he thinks of her kiss, the firelight in her gaze, the tilt of her smile. Instead of being plagued with fears of returning home— fears of hurting her— he’s plagued with longing, with impatience.
The brief respite can't last, though. As soon as he’s feeling well enough to begin eating some of his meal, his siblings have arrived. A defected bannerman from House Karstark pushes Bran’s wheelchair; when Jon locks eyes with him, the man regards him stoically.

“You’re said to be happy down south,” Sansa greets Jon flatly. “You don’t look it. You don’t look like you’ve been happy.”

Jon ignores her. He watches Bran as he’s wheeled up to his place at the table where his breakfast is already waiting. Bran watches him, too—a look that, for a moment, seems almost calculating.

“Hello, Bran,” Jon greets.

Bran sets his hands beside his plate. “Hello, Your Grace.”

It sounds ridiculous coming from his brother’s mouth. He can’t help but correct him. “Jon.”

Bran makes no comment back to that. Nor does he touch his food. Jon waits for Sansa to sit, and once she has, he dismisses the soldier. Once they’re alone, he looks at his siblings.

“This stops now. Right now. All of it. It stops now—or I will arrest you myself. Challenge me to prove my words and you’ll see.”

Sansa’s expression twists unhappily. She looks at Bran.

“You’ll have to be more specific, Jon,” Bran requests. “What is it you’d like us to stop?”

His dull, emotionless tone sparks Jon’s irritation. He sounds like he couldn’t care less about this conversation even if he tried, and Jon’s traveled all this way to speak with him—to try and give him and Sansa the benefit of the doubt—to try and find peace where they’ve only sown distrust. His glare is hot.

“Okay. Let me be more specific. You will stop rallying bannermen against your queen. You will stop telling Tyrion Lannister lies to try and poison the queen against me. You will stop threatening to march south in my name. You will stop your treason, or I will stop it for you. Is that specific enough for you?”

Sansa lifts her glass to her lips, her eyebrows raised slightly. “Well, you’re certainly starting to sound like a king.”

“I am the king.”

Sansa lowers her glass. “It’s good to finally hear you say it. That’s what I’ve been telling you all along.”

“No,” he says, his voice low, a growl. “I am the king. ‘A King Regent is no King’—I rule with full titles, as does Queen Daenerys. This is over, Sansa. You’ve gotten what you thought you wanted. I just don’t think it’s anything like what you’d expected it’d be. Moving forward, the North will bend the knee, or you’ll be stripped of your titles and your lands and the Northern seat will move to Hornwood.”

“House Hornwood?” Sansa demands, her affront clear.

“Yes, House Hornwood. A House that fought alongside me against Ramsay Snow, against the Army of the Dead, and helped the queen and I take King’s Landing. Not House Stark, which has, as of late, merely attempted to steal bannerman from their sworn houses, betray their own blood, and
usurp the queen, for little reason beyond Sansa Stark’s inexplicable dislike and greed.”

Sansa’s furious. She stands up and looms over Jon. Several of his guard take a couple steps forward, but Jon lifts a hand, stopping them. Just as it was when they were small, his lack of reaction to Sansa’s fury only makes her angrier. Good.

“House Stark which raised you! House Stark which took you in, protected you as their own from the people who would have slaughtered you before you even took your first step—”

“The people who would have hunted me down as they attempted to hunt Daenerys Targaryen down all her life, yes, and yet you’re conspiring against her now as if that’s what she deserved all along—”

“You don’t know the things I know—”

“I know you’re a treasonous liar who has betrayed me in ways Father would be ashamed of. You bring up my childhood as if I should be indebted to you — for what? What have you done for me? You never treated me like I was a Stark when I was a child. And I am one. My mother was Lyanna Stark, which gives me as much a right to be here as you, regardless of who my birth father was. Our father took my identity to his grave rather than tell, and you’re using my identity to try and get power of your own. It won’t work. I owe you nothing. Not now.”

She’s cold. “You owe your life to House Stark.”

He slowly stands, meeting every bit of her coldness with his own. “And you owe your life to my wife. Every Northman does.”

“I believe your wife’s been paid in full,” Sansa spits. “She’s got the throne that should be yours and, from the looks of it, her very own Northern puppet.”

Jon wants to say something hurtful to her, but instead, he steps back. He laughs. It gets underneath Sansa’s skin easier than his cruelest words would have: her cheeks turn ruddy with anger.

“Sansa, even if you managed to turn me against our queen, even if you somehow convinced me to take the throne as mine and mine alone, I wouldn’t make you Queen in the North,” he says. It’s spiteful. He sees her gaze dart uncertainly to Bran. “Perhaps at one time I would have. But not now. I see where your loyalty truly lies: with yourself.”

She shakes her head. Her expression falls. “This isn’t you, Jon. Think of what you’re saying.”

“Oh, I am. That’s all I’ve been thinking about the entire journey here.”

Bran’s voice interrupts their conversation. He’d been watching so quietly that Jon had almost forgotten he was there.

“Certainly that’s not all you’ve been thinking of,” he comments.

Both Sansa and Jon turn to look at him. Jon’s anxiety surges after that comment, though he’s not sure why. Bran can’t know the things he’s been seeing in his sleep, the horrible things he’d been fretting over. He’s told no one of them and never will.

“Certainly you’ve been wondering why Sansa and I are doing what we’re doing,” Bran continues.

“At the start, yeah,” Jon agrees. “But now? I think the queen cares more about why than I do. I just want you to stop. You’re both an embarrassment to me.”
“You’re going to want a lot of things to stop,” Bran tells him, “but they won’t, until you make them.”

“You know, I think I like it better when you’re just staring at me,” Jon snaps. “I don’t have time for this, Bran.”

“You’ll find that this is all you have time for. I know you want to get back to King’s Landing, but you never will. The woman you left won’t be there.”

Jon almost feels as if he’s not in control of his own body. He finds himself looming over Bran in his chair, his face above his, rage pulsing through him. And beneath that rage: dread. The same kind that’d been festering all month.

“Is that a threat against the queen?”

Bran blinks, undeterred by Jon’s anger. “Not in the way you think. Consider it a warning, not a threat. A warning of things to come, and not by any hand but her own.”

“We need to talk, Jon,” Sansa says. “You need to hear things you won’t want to hear. You need to listen. Afterwards, if you still want to arrest us, arrest us. But this is bigger than a power struggle between you and I.”

“Why should I listen to anything you’ve got to say?” Jon asks them.

“I’m the only one you should listen to. I’m the Three-Eyed Raven.”

Jon hasn’t forgotten what Arya told him about Bran. Hasn’t forgotten that Bran deceived her. He regards him icily.

“I liked you better as Bran Stark.”

“Bran Stark is gone. But if he were here, he’d want his brother to listen,” Bran says.

“Listen to you lie?”

“I can’t lie.”

“You’re lying right now,” Jon snaps. “You lied to Arya, and you’re lying to me.”

“Arya?” Sansa demands, her voice sharp. “What of Arya? She left exploring.”

Jon says nothing back to that. Bran and Sansa exchange an unhappy look.

“She’s South,” Bran realizes. When Jon looks at him, he’s looking distantly at the wall, though Jon can tell he’s seeing something else. “She’s South. With Daenerys.”

“Queen Daenerys,” Jon corrects coldly. He doesn’t like hearing Bran hold Dany’s name so familiarly in his mouth.

“What?!” Sansa demands.

Bran and Sansa are not happy about this. Jon doesn’t know if they mean to show that or not, but he knows his siblings’s faces. For better or for worse.

“Where Arya is is Arya’s business,” Jon says, knowing it best to play his cards close to his chest. “What matters is that you lied to her. You told her, repeatedly, that the queen burned down King’s
Landing. And the queen did not.”

“Jon…” Sansa sounds pitying.

“I was there. I know what happened. I saw it with my own eyes, and afterwards, the aftermath. Queen Daenerys did not burn down Flea Bottom like you told Arya. Cersei Lannister planted a line of wildfire caches around the city, set to ignite in a chain reaction should the Red Keep catch fire.”

“She’s done a good job making you think that.”

“I don’t think it. I know it,” Jon argues. He turns on Bran. “Which brings to question why you’d lie about it.”

“Bran can’t lie—”

“Bran did.”

“He didn’t! You’ve no proof that happened!”

“What I saw with my own eyes wasn’t proof?! Do you hear yourself, Sansa?! You sound mad!” Sansa’s anger rises alongside Jon’s.

“And you’d know, wouldn’t you? What madness sounds like— bedding a Targaryen and all!”

“I am a Targaryen!”

“Yes,” Bran says evenly. He turns to catch Jon’s eyes. “You are.”

Implications flow between their locked gaze. Jon feels his head surge with abrupt pain, his stomach clench with nausea. He fights both back.

“Daenerys is saner than the lot of you,” Jon snarls.

“You’ve no idea what you’re talking about,” Sansa tells him. “Your queen— your wife— is mad. She’s going to succumb to that madness and she’s going to kill millions, Jon. Bran saw it. Bran knows. That’s why you have to leave now— I don’t know what she’s said to you to get you to marry her but you have to regain the Throne and remove her from it, Bran saw—”

“What? Bran saw bloody what?!” Jon yells. His pain is getting worse. He’s having a hard time focusing on what they’re saying. “You saw the future, Bran? Fine. Then tell me exactly what you saw. Stop playing mind games with me. Stop trying to manipulate me. You want me to turn against Daenerys and rule— why?!”

“Because she’s going to wipe out millions, Jon. She’s going to suffer a great lose, and she’s going to go mad because of it, and nothing will stop her from bathing Westeros in fire. After Westeros, Essos. I’ve seen the bones, the pain, the suffering. And the only way to stop it is if you take her power away. If you stop her.”

Bran’s words hang in the air. Jon guesses they’re meant to be powerful from the way Sansa appears to be holding her breath as she watches Jon process them, but he just wants to laugh. Because they have no idea. They don’t know who Daenerys is at all. If they did, they wouldn’t even bother trying to spin this story. They’d know it’s impossible.

“Daenerys shows more care for the innocents of King’s Landing in an hour than Cersei showed during her entire rule. You don’t know the queen. You don’t know who she is. Her heart is good—
she loves her people. And she’s certainly not mad. She’s suffered so many ‘great losses’ I doubt I could count them all, and she’s pulled through every one. Nothing would make her burn the world down. Not the world she’s actively making a better place.” Jon stands. “She’s done nothing but help the North. Nothing but help protect both of you. I’m through with this conversation. I’m through with both of you. Prepare a statement to make in front of all the Northern lords bending your knee to myself and the queen by the end of the week, or prepare to ride back to King’s Landing in chains.”

He shoves his chair back so hard it knocks into the table, causing Sansa’s juice to knock over. It spills ruby over the table, dripping to the floor in a steady, thick stream. It reminds Jon of the blood from his nightmares, and for a second, he’s so overcome with pain that he sways on his feet.

Bran’s voice rings through the room. “It starts with terrible thoughts that come at night.”

Jon had been covering his eyes with his hand, trying to work through his pain, but at that, he lowers his hand and looks at Bran. Bran is watching him steadily.

“Things they don’t want to think about, but can’t help it. Repetitive things. The same night terror, perhaps, on a loop every night. Thoughts as intrusive as they are terrifying. What they hear is different for everyone: the Mad King heard treasonous whispers behind his back. Aerion Brightflame heard that he’d turn into a dragon if he drank wildfire. They fought it valiantly at first, and in the case of many, it doesn’t set in ’til well into their adult lives. But it is setting in for Daenerys Targaryen. Remember my words. You’ll start to see it in her. You’ll know I’m right. You’ll know.”

Jon’s heart is pounding erratically. He thinks he might vomit for a moment. Bran refuses to drop their gaze: it’s the longest Jon’s looked into his brother’s eyes since reuniting. He finds himself thinking he doesn’t look much like Bran Stark at all the longer he looks.

“Of course what I’m telling you doesn’t make sense. Of course you can’t imagine her doing those things. That’s why it’s called madness, Jon. It’s uncontrollable, unexpected. Pure aberration. I know you love her…it’s a terrible thing. But there’s nothing you can do now except accept your duty to the people you’re sworn to protect, and stop her.”

Jon feels as if he’s sinking in self-doubt and fear, but he won’t let it show. He won’t.

“I am accepting my duty to the people I’m sworn to protect,” Jon tells him. My wife and my child.

“You’re wrong. She’s not. And you’re wrong to say every Targaryen is mad. Rhaegar Targaryen wasn’t mad. A great many Targaryens weren’t.” I’m not. I’m not.

“No. Not every Targaryen is mad. But when they are…there’s nothing in the world more dangerous.” Bran looks to the window. “I’m tired. I’m going to go now. Think about what I’ve said, Jon.”

“I won’t,” Jon swears. He shakes his head, disgusted. “I won’t.”

“I truly don’t think you’ll be able to help it.”

VI.

He’s too afraid to sleep that night, so he takes to his chambers and sits alone at the table near the window, drafting half a dozen ravens to send back home— and deciding, in the end, to send none of them. He has no real news to tell Dany, nothing she didn’t already know, except for the thing he won’t tell her (that Bran is prophesying her madness).

Dany has spoken to him about ‘Targaryen madness’ on a handful of occasions, admitting each time that it was a fear she couldn’t shake, something that had chased her down her entire life. My father’s
madness is a shadow that will loom over me for all my days, she’d said once, her voice resigned. I will always have to work twice as hard as any other ruler, be twice as kind. And I must ask myself twice the number of questions every time I make a choice, too. They say my father started out sane. I intend to start and finish that way.

Of course, Bran hasn’t managed to make Jon doubt what he wants to make him doubt. Jon doesn’t return to his chambers, furious and frustrated, thinking his wife is doomed to go mad. Jon returns to his chambers, furious and frustrated, fearing that he is.

It starts with terrible thoughts that come at night.

That’s all he’d had for over a month. Terrible thoughts at night. Fears that leave him in tears when he wakes. Trauma that makes him nauseated during the daylight hours.

Remember my words. You’ll start to see it in her. You’ll know I’m right. You’ll know.

He doesn’t see it in Dany. He never has. But he sees it in himself. And he can’t help but fear that gives a sort of credence to Bran’s warning. If he’s going mad as Bran said, maybe there’s truth to the ‘madness’ Bran speaks of. Maybe there’s a chance both he and Dany are going to unravel in some horrible, terrible way.

He doesn’t want to believe it. He can’t believe it. But as he scratches out his tenth set of words to his wife, unsure how to say anything that he wants to say or anything at all, he can’t stop the doubts that plague him. The worries. He knows his never-ending headache, his fear, his lack of sleep and food are all major contributors to that doubt, but that knowledge does little to ground him.

I miss you, he writes on the eleventh scroll of parchment. I worry for you, and I wish to speak with you more than I’ve wished for anything else.

But that won’t do, either. He doesn’t want to concern her. He doesn’t want her to fret for him any more than he knows she already is.

You were right, he writes in another draft. I should have just sent for their heads. I should have stayed home.

Then: You told me once the things you dream come true. How did you know it would come true? Do your nightmares ever come true?

He writes a total of twenty-six ravens, each saying all the things he wishes he could, only to burn them all one by one in the fireplace. When they’ve been reduced to ash, he puts his boots back on and steals down to the kitchens. Three of his Unsullied guards attempt to shadow him, but Jon sends them off, needing no more protection than Longclaw at his hip.

As he had suspected, he’s not alone in the kitchens. It’s dim—all the kitchengirls have retired for the night—but Lord Tyrion sits in the far corner, nursing a massive tankard of ale. Red Fly watches on with something akin to disgust.

“Your Grace,” Lord Tyrion greets. He doesn’t look particularly shocked to see Jon, and when Jon pours his own mug of ale, he doesn’t look shocked about that, either. “I take it your conversation with Sansa and Bran didn’t go well this morning.”

Jon’s not drinking because of Bran and Sansa. He’s drinking because he’s desperate to dull the terrors he knows will come when he finally gives into sleep. He knows it may only make it worse, but he’s got to try something. He can’t take one more night of waking with the memory of his wife’s shocked, betrayed eyes, her blood wet on his hands.
“No,” Jon shares. He takes a long drink and then locks eyes with Lord Tyrion. “Bran told me that Daenerys is going to go mad and slaughter millions of people. He’s told me I have to betray her, to turn on her. I don’t imagine he told you that part when he told you I was going to betray her.”

Lord Tyrion at least looks startled, though that look fades to one of wariness soon after. “Well, he was vague when he spoke with me. Though, I should say, he said you would destroy her, not only betray her. Surely you understand the connotative difference to that. Surely you understand my reluctance. Destroy her in every way a person can be destroyed, he said. He told me the only way to prevent that was to keep you two apart. And I failed miserably at that. If he turns out right, it was my greatest failure.”

Jon is accosted by a quick flash of terrible things, the same sort he’d seen nightly—a hand bloodily tearing silver-gold hair out by the root, skin blistering and turning to ash, thick hands squeezing a lovely throat—and he has to set his ale to the side, too nauseated to keep drinking it.

“And do you think he’ll turn out right? Do you still believe him?” Jon hears himself ask. He hears the way his own voice shakes. He hates how vulnerable he sounds. “Do you think I’m going to do that?”

“Do you?” Lord Tyrion shoots back, visibly troubled by the question.

“No,” Jon says at once, and he shivers at the thought. “I couldn’t.”

“You wouldn’t,” Lord Tyrion corrects.

“No,” Jon says firmly. “I couldn’t. And I wouldn’t.”

Lord Tyrion makes no comment back to that, but Jon can tell he’s thinking. He drinks as he does, staring hard at the dying fire in the massive cooking hearth.

“He wanted me to keep you two separated so that you don’t destroy her, but he wants you to betray her so that she doesn’t destroy the world,” Lord Tyrion finally muses aloud. He fiddles absently with the rings on his right hand. “I feel as if we’re not being told everything. And I suppose it’s well within the Three-Eyed Raven’s rights to keep information from us. But I can’t fit those two things together. If she was going to destroy the world, why wouldn’t Bran just tell me how so I can intercept it before it happens? If you’re supposed to be the catalyst to set her off into madness, I could see why he’d want me to keep you two apart, but then why would he wait ’til now to tell you what’s to come…wouldn’t it have been better for him to advise you not to get close to her from the start? If you’re the cause of her downfall?”

“Is that what he implied to you? That I cause her ‘madness’?” Jon asks.

“Yes, or that was how I interpreted it. He didn’t tell you the same?”

“If he did, that’s not how I interpreted it. He said something of ‘great loss’.”

Lord Tyrion nods. “He mentioned something of the same to me. I thought, at first, that it would be Missandei. Our queen certainly unraveled after that. I expected the worst. But she pulled through. So then I assumed it would be your betrayal, that that would be the loss.”

Jon doesn’t know much, but he knows that’s rubbish. “No. And that’s not what Bran told me, either. He said she would go insane and then I would have to betray her, not that my betrayal— and the loss of me—would set her off.”

Lord Tyrion hums thoughtfully. Jon guesses the alcohol has dulled things enough for him that this is
little more than a philosophical debate. Jon, in contrast, feels as if his anxiety is eroding his insides.

“Maybe it’s the baby.”

Jon snaps his gaze to Lord Tyrion at once, his heart dropping with sickening force. He finds himself shaking his head.

“No. It’s not.”

“She was certainly under the impression she couldn’t have children which implies a certain level of self-doubt to her own ability to bear and deliver them.” There’s a pause. “She told me once her first child was stillborn. Deformed.”

Jon thinks at once to the way Dany had looked the first time she’d told him of her son. At the time, he remembers thinking with amazement that she’d lived through it. The pain seeping in her eyes was so great, so vivid, that his own eyes had burned with withheld tears when he reached out to hold her. He remembers thinking you’ll never have to go through that ever again. Had he lied?

“No, it was some…witch who caused that. The same witch who told her she’d never bear another child, some awful woman who did horrible blood magic as an act of revenge, and clearly it was little more than a lie meant to upset her: I certainly had no problem getting her pregnant.”

Tyrion inclines his head in agreement, but he appears troubled for the first time. “Clearly. But a successful pregnancy doesn’t mean a successful birth. The queen’s own mother knew that well. Three healthy babes she had, yes—but three others she bled out, too more never took a breath, and three more she buried within the year.” Lord Tyrion rises to get more ale, and when he grabs Jon’s forgotten tankard and refills it, Jon takes it. “Many people believed those losses helped lead to King Aerys’s madness.”

What Lord Tyrion is hypothesizing is so upsetting that Jon instinctively wants to do nothing more than avoid the topic. He wants to stand and leave, taking as much alcohol with him as he needs to forget this conversation entirely. But he doesn’t have the luxury of that. He feels as if he needs to figure out Bran’s intentions, needs to figure out why he’s say the things that he’s said (because they can’t be true). And talking through it is all he can do.

“Then why would he tell you that you need to keep Daenerys and I apart to prevent her destruction? At that point, she was already pregnant. Keeping us apart wouldn’t undo that.”

“No, that’s true,” Tyrion agrees.

“And I’m meant to believe in this scenario that Daenerys loses our child, goes mad, and then I— on top of everything else she’s endured— turn against her? I couldn’t hate my own worst enemy that much.”

“You can’t think of one thing she could do terrible enough to turn you against her? One thing horrible enough? The murder of millions of innocents, even?”

“And you believe she’d do that?” Jon demands, furious.

“Of course I don’t. You forget—I sought our queen out and chose her just as much as you did. She’s the only thing in this shit world I’ve ever believed in. But Bran knows something, Jon. And we need to figure out what that something is. He’s trying to get me to turn her against you—for her own good, he says—and he’s trying to get you to turn against her—for the world’s good, he says. Why? What is he afraid of? As far as I can tell, the only thing he’s consistently trying to prevent is you two being together.”
“And if our daughter is doomed to die, if that’s going to be the final, great loss that sends our queen over the edge, what does keeping us apart have to do with anything? What does making us turn against each other even matter?”

“Unless he wants you to be the one to dispose of her.”

Jon stands, his hand landing on Longclaw, his face red and hot in his anger. He hardly processes any rational thought—all he can think of is that word dispose. It triggers some untouched rage deep within Jon. He can’t help but think off those terrible visions again. Lord Tyrion holds his hands out quickly.

“I’m not saying I agree! I’m not saying I want that! You know I want the opposite! That’s why I tried to talk Queen Daenerys out of being with you in the first place!”

Jon stares at Lord Tyrion, heart pounding, hand frozen on his sword.

“Drink more,” Tyrion orders. “Much, much more. It doesn’t help anything make any more sense, but it does make the confusion more bearable.”

“Maybe for you. Nothing makes this bearable for me. Nothing.”

“I think, in times of confusion, it’s important to remember the things we do know,” Tyrion says. He slides off his chair and comes over, lifting Jon’s tankard from the table and handing it to him. Jon gradually lowers his hand from Longclaw and takes it. He drinks from it simply because he doesn’t know what else to do. “Here’s what we know: Queen Daenerys is currently in King’s Landing, holding court with the people every day, and looking, according to Ser Davos, more and more radiant with each day that passes. We know that— indisputably.”

Jon feels himself sink back down into his seat. He plants his feet firmly on the floor, letting Tyrion’s words and his own physical presence ground him. Even the pain in his head retreats a bit.

“Arya Stark and Grey Worm are at the queen’s side day and night, both undoubtedly engaged in an unstated battle of loyalty. We know this for a fact.”

Jon takes another drink. His eyes close as he listens to the weak crackling of the fire and Tyrion’s continued words.

“Our queen loves and trusts you. This we know—for a fact.”

Jon doesn’t miss the way Tyrion’s voice catches in his throat. When Jon opens his eyes and looks at Lord Tyrion, his expression is forlorn in the dying light. Resigned.

He clears his throat before he continues. “What we can’t know, of course, is the future, and the truly frustrating thing here is that we’re trying to make sense of the motivations and intentions of someone who can know the future. Someone who has access to a wealth of information that we don’t. And all we can do is trust what he says and trust that he’s not misleading us because we’ve got no way to check his information, no way to doubt the context of it—it’s a battle of wits, and I’m afraid we’re depressingly out-matched.”

Jon has never agreed with anything more.

“So we truly only have two choices available to us now. One: we go to Bran and we trust him. We ask him to tell us exactly what we need to do, and we do whatever that is, no matter what it is, because we understand and we recognize that he knows things we can’t. If we do this, we must be certain that his intentions are good. We must be certain that he’s devoid of all fallacy, all greed, all
maliciousness. And if we’re not sure of that—if we can’t be certain we trust what he tells us—there’s only one other choice available to us. Two: We investigate what the Three-Eyed Raven really is. We examine everything he says to us, everything he does. We assume, for the time being, that he has treacherous intentions that haven’t come to light. We act based on the things that we presently know, never on the things Bran tells us will come to pass. And we all speak openly with each other. If Bran is trying to achieve some larger goal, he’s not being open about what that larger goal is: we know this because he’s giving you and I slightly different versions of the same thing, trying to lead us both to slightly different goals. If he’s made that mistake once, he’d made it twice. He’s made it with Sansa. So, if we choose this second option, I’m going to need your permission to speak with Sansa.”

A long spiel— yet all Jon can focus on come the end is Tyrion’s request.

“No. I still don’t trust you. And you’re forgetting the third option: I arrest Bran and Sansa and I try them for treason in King’s Landing.”

“Effective if your goal is to simply silence and restrict them. But ineffective if your goal is to understand what Bran is trying to warn us about or achieve.” Jon scowls. Tyrion presses forward. “You’re the king, Your Grace. What you decide is what we’ll do. But if I were you—if I had the Three-Eyed Raven consistently saying something horrible was going to happen to my wife…I’d want to know everything I possibly could so that I could stop it.”

Tyrion’s starting to make sense, and that only confuses Jon more.

“And how can I trust that you’re not playing games with my mind, too? How can I know you’re not just trying to lead me to whatever….thing Bran is trying to lead me towards?”

Tyrion smiles. It’s unexpected. It doesn’t take Jon long to realize it’s dry, sad—a bit self-mocking.

“Because I love her,” Tyrion says simply. “I think I always have. I always will. Perhaps stupidly…I would do anything for her. So I’m not willing to trust blindly in Bran Stark if it means leading you towards betraying and killing her. Maybe it’s naive of me, but I have little interest in a world without Daenerys Targaryen. I need not know any other specifics to know that.”

“And what does that mean, then? What do we do?”

Tyrion drains the last of his ale. “All the things we normally do—the things we’re good at. I will read a great many books, drink a great deal of wine, and talk until I tire of my own voice. You will stand by your word and duty to Queen Daenerys no matter what is said, no matter what is done, and watch carefully.” Lord Tyrion appears to laugh at his own thoughts, and then he turns to look up at Jon. “And so your watch begins…again.”

Jon doesn’t think it’s funny at all, nor does he have any desire to joke with Tyrion about anything right now.

“I’m watching Bran?” he clarifies.

“Bran, yes. And Sansa. And you’re to keep as close an eye as possible on the Queen’s state through regular correspondence with her, your sister, and Ser Davos. No matter what Bran is trying to allude or lead us to, we know it has to do with her. She’ll be important.”

“She is important. And not because of the bloody Three-Eyed Raven.”

“Need I remind you, Jon, that you don’t need to convince me of that?”

Jon doesn’t know what to say back to that so he says nothing. He looks to the window: the darkness
outside makes exhaustion begin to creep into his bones once more, but he wants to sleep now even less than he did before. He feels saner right now than he’s felt in over a month. His head hurts less than it has all day. He’s afraid to go to bed, afraid to see those horrible images again—those images. If it’s true that Bran wants him to be Dany’s downfall…is that what he’s been seeing in his nightmares, entwined with visions of all their ancestors’ suffering? Is that why he keeps hurting her in his visions—keeps waking with tears on his cheeks, sweat pouring down his body, her screams echoing in his brain? *My dreams come true*, Dany had said. Were his going to? Was he going to go mad and betray her, kill her? Was he going to go mad and hurt her or their child—would that be what would set her off?

He can’t theorize about any of these fears with Tyrion because he can’t ever tell Tyrion what he’s seeing in his sleep. If he told Tyrion of the things he’d done in these dreams, Tyrion would turn against him in an instant. And as much as Jon doesn’t fully trust him, he does trust that Tyrion has the ability to make sense of all this in a way Jon doesn’t. Which is why it hurts so much that he can’t just tell him now what he’s grappling with; he thinks Tyrion might have some insight into what’s happening to him.

But Jon’s becoming convinced that what’s happening to him is just *madness*. And if that’s true, he must keep it a secret as long as he possibly can. He must keep it a secret until he secures Dany’s safety. No matter the cost.

“Just remind yourself of the things you know,” Tyrion tells him. Jon guesses his anguish is clear on his face.

Later, when Jon reluctantly returns to his chambers, he tries to do just that. He reminds himself of the facts, the things that are undeniable. But one of those facts is that something is happening to him. Without knowing what, he has no way to know what to do about it. If he even can do anything about it.

He writes one more letter. This one, he doesn’t burn.

_Dany,_

*Here are the things that I know: I love you, and we have always belonged together. There is nothing in this world softer than you, better than you—I think of holding you every night. Nothing else matters.*

_I will be staying North for a bit longer than previously said. There are things we must deal with here, things we must figure out. Do not worry—I will deal with all matters here as I promised you, as I swore. Then I will return home to you—like I promised, as I swore._

*Stay with Arya. Bran and Sansa were not happy to hear she was with you, which means she should stay even closer. I do not understand it all, but I have come to the conclusion that we should be standing by whatever Bran and Sansa turn against._

*I stand by you. And, I know, you by me._

*Ser Davos wrote us about the victory at the Bay of Dragons. It was all that brought me joy since I left King’s Landing. I am happy for you—and proud._

*He writes that you look more radiant every day. I wish I had eyes there to see it. Take care of yourself and her._

_Jon_
VII.

Today, she cannot manage her anxiety.

That realization creeps up on her in the middle of speaking with a young Flea Bottom man. It creeps up on her as a flash of nausea, a feeling of deep dread. A sharp tug in her brain. All morning she’s been sat here in this audience chamber— like every day— but today, she can’t do it.

Her legs tremble as she rises abruptly.

“My Hand will be happy to assist you,” she manages, and Ser Davos looks at her in surprise as she walks quickly from the chamber.

She waits until she’s in the corridor outside her own chambers, alone except for a few motionless guards. She sags against the wall and presses her hand over her swollen stomach, her heart pounding hard, pain lodged somewhere behind her eyes. The thoughts come, the paranoid suspicions, and then the memories of the nightmares that sometimes haunt her: her daughter, born a monster. Her daughter, born dead. Her daughter, smothered at her own breast. Her daughter, ripped from her arms and slaughtered. Her daughter, cut from her belly, hanging from the umbilical cord. Her daughter, stabbed fifty times like her brother’s daughter Rhaenys, her blood soaking her silver-gold hair, and when they drag her tiny, limp body, her hair paints the floor ruby-black—

Stop, she thinks firmly. She tries to separate her emotions from her thoughts. She breathes deeply through her mouth and closes her eyes tightly. She sinks into her own head, pretends her thoughts are a vast pool she can reach into. She searches for the thoughts that are creeping on her, the paranoia that makes her sick. Sometimes, she can stop them this way. Stop it. Stop now. She thinks of the house with the red door, Ser Jorah’s kind smile, Ser Barristan’s unwavering faith, Jon Snow’s eyes. Mhysa, her three dragons right after they hatched in her arms, the first time she sat on the Dragonstone throne. Jon’s face above hers. Stop.

She’s gripping her stomach so hard that her knuckles are white. She’s so lost in her inner war that she doesn’t hear anyone creep up; Arya’s hand on her arm makes her jump.

“Do you need the maester?” Arya asks. She sounds nervous, and it’s then that Dany registers how tightly she’s holding her own stomach. She drops her hands at once and meets Arya’s dark eyes.

“No,” Dany says faintly. “I’m fine.”

It appears to Dany that Arya has arrived for some sort of intervention. Her eyes are hard with determination, her mouth set. She reaches out and takes Dany’s hand in hers firmly and begins walking her to her chambers. Dany’s so taken aback by her forcefulness that she doesn’t argue; she nods reassuringly at her guards to let them know it’s okay and follows Arya inside. Arya closes the door after them and turns to Dany.

“You put on ‘the Queen act’ well, but you’re not fine. You’re scared senseless,” she says. “You have been for a while now. The only time I see you eat is when we all eat together in the audience chamber, and even then it’s barely anything. Your guards say you hardly sleep. Has somebody threatened you? Tell me.”

There’s no doubting the wolf in Arya’s blood. Dany thinks to herself, standing there with Arya, that Arya would rip the face off anyone who came too close to them right then. With her bare teeth. It might’ve been intimidating— if Dany didn’t know those eyes well. They were, in many ways, Jon’s eyes. Lyanna Stark’s eyes.
“No. It’s not that,” Dany answers. She wants to stop there, but something in Arya’s eyes makes her continue on, the words rushed and quiet. “I feel…I can’t explain it. I don’t understand it. But any time I try to eat, or sleep, or even rest— I feel so frightened I feel sick.”

Her hand goes to her stomach again. Arya looks down and then back up at Dany.

“Do you think you’re ill?” Arya asks, sounding (and appearing) genuinely concerned. Her concern only makes Dany feel worse: it validates her own paranoia, in a way. If Arya’s worried, she should be, too.

“I…” she stops. She can’t get herself to finish. To say: _I feel unwell in every way a person can. I don’t think this is a virus or an infection. I didn’t know a person could even feel like this. Like they’re scared to even take care of themselves, frightened to do the very things they know they must do to survive._

She observes Dany as Dany struggles to regain her composure. Her strength. She’s convinced Arya will just walk away, call her mad and be done with it. But she doesn’t.

“Do you think your food is poisoned? Is that why you won’t eat? Do you think someone will sneak up on you when you’re sleeping or resting? Is the why you don’t sleep?” she asks.

She’s trying to rationalize what isn’t rational. She’s trying to make sense of what makes little. Daenerys understands why she’s asking that, but it only amplifies Dany’s own fears that she’s going mad because none of it makes sense. None of it is that easy.

She can’t answer, and Arya takes that as a confirmation. She huffs, almost as if Dany’s worries are an insult against her guarding skills, and then she turns towards the small table near Dany’s door, where her tray from breakfast is still sitting, untouched. Arya snatches a piece of stale spiced bread and rips half of it off with her teeth. Wolfflike.

“Not poisoned. None of it’s poisoned. You think I promised my brother to keep you safe only to let some half-witted kitchen staff poison your food? Grey Worm and I have soldiers watching everywhere— everything—everyone. We know what oils your handmaiden brings into your room for your bath, we know exactly which tin the spices that go on your food come from. I’ve made an oath to Jon, and Grey Worm to you, and neither of us are quick to think lightly of those promises.”

Dany wonders why that spiel doesn’t make her feel better. Why it doesn’t make her hunger return, why it doesn’t make her take the bread Arya holds out to her. Why it doesn’t make the anxiety writhing in her stomach, alive and dangerous, any calmer. Why it brings tears to her eyes.

“It’s not that,” is all she can say. She sounds broken to her own ears. Weak. She hates it. “It’s just…it’s fear. A kind I’ve never known before.”

She had mastered fear all her life. She had lived with it, grown up beside it. She thought she knew every one of its faces, but this face is something new.

Arya drops the bread back to Dany’s tray and observes her as if Dany’s some particularly challenging arithmetic problem, some true conundrum. Dany wonders if Arya knew what she was getting herself into when she’d agreed to stay by her side. The people in her life often don’t.

“You know what makes me feel better when I’m frightened?” Arya asks, finally settling on something to say. “Water dancing.”

It’s so unexpected that Daenerys can’t help but smile. Her hand drops from her stomach.
“Braavos. I lived there for a time. When I was small.” She thinks of the house with the red door again. Of her soft, vague memories of Ser Willem. A time, she thinks, she lived with as little fear as she ever had.

“One of the greatest men I ever knew was a master of the Water Dance. When I felt small, and frustrated, and out of control, he helped make me feel powerful,” Arya says. She sets her hand on the pommel of the sword at her hip. “I could teach you.”

Dany laughs, but it’s weak and thin. She thinks briefly of the night Ser Jorah died, the helpless heft of the sword in her hands. “I don’t think I’d be a good pupil.”

“I can handle it, so long as you don’t execute me for treason when I critique you. We could do lessons at night. Times when I’ve been frightened, it was always the nights that were the worst. Especially when you’re alone.”

Dany is painfully aware of that fact. Jon’s absence each night is amplified by her fear and loneliness. She probably would have agreed to learn any trade on earth if it meant she got to spend her nights outside of her chambers, away from her fear. With all that currently remains of Jon in King’s Landing— Arya. And hadn’t Jon asked her to stay near Arya?

“All right,” Daenerys agrees.

Of course, Jon also asked her to take care of herself and their baby, and Dany isn’t managing that half as well as she should be. And she doesn’t even know why. That makes it even harder.

She’s not optimistic that swordwork will help her overcome the fear that’s supplanted reason, but she knows it certainly can’t make it any worse.

VIII.

Tyrion’s decided that if there’s one benefit to being held hostage, it’s that his skills with the Astapori dialect of Low Valyrian have improved rapidly. Red Fly, it turns out, has a sharp sense of humor, which makes his unavoidable, consent presence a bit more bearable.

“It doesn’t make any sense,” Tyrion complains, shoving the complicated text in front of him a bit (but gently— it’s a rare tome, as many in the Winterfell library are— and as much as its complexity has frustrated him, he doesn’t wish it damaged.)

“I’m sure the wine helps with the difficulty,” Red Fly comments dryly.

Tyrion guards his flask jealously. Red Fly’s been threatening to confiscate it for days now, and with Tyrion left largely in his control, there’s little he could do against it. Red Fly keeps insisting the alcohol is hindering him, but on the contrary: Tyrion thinks the problem is that he needs more wine.

“These texts are so confusing that I’ll need all the help I can get to make sense of them,” he argues. Reluctantly, he pulls the ancient text back over. The illustrations of runes of the Old Tongue of the First Men accompanying the long, technical passages (thankfully written in the Common Tongue) are just familiar enough for Tyrion to realize that they’re probably of some importance, but not familiar enough to make any real sense of them. He feels he’s missing entire swaths of information about the Children of the Forest. The septon, of course, has reminded him many times that many scholars view the Children of the Forest as myth, but at Tyrion’s persistence, he’d dug three dusty, time-abused texts from the shelves. At the time, Tyrion had told Red Fly Three books! I’ll be done by supper. But he’d been picking through these texts for a week now, and he was still no closer to really understanding what Bran was supposed to be or what he could do.
“The drawings probably matter,” Red Fly tells Tyrion, after he’s flipped past three pages of runes.

“Yes,” Tyrion says sharply, “I’m sure they probably do! Unfortunately, they mean little more to me than Myrcella’s pretend language did when she was two.”

Red Fly shrugs. Tyrion wishes Sansa hadn’t sent the wildlings back towards the wall after the fight against the Army of the Dead; surely one of them would have been able to provide him some insight here.

A sudden idea makes him perk up. He looks hopefully at Red Fly.

“Do you suppose the king knows any runes? He’s lived outside of the wall, after all.”

Red Fly crosses his legs. “Not unless he had a wildling lover who taught runes to him.”

Tyrion snorts. He looks back at the text. “ Noticed his particular language errors, did you? I tried to correct him.”

“Blue Rat is helping him. He’s already getting better.”

Tyrion flips back to the pages with the runes. Privately, Tyrion doubts Jon is getting anything of substance from any Low Valyrian lessons, no matter the instructor or the dialect. Jon, last Tyrion had seen him, looked haggard, preoccupied. Stressed beyond measure.

“Well, it’d do me some good if he could reveal a miraculous hidden knowledge of runes.”

“And it’d do me some good if this horrible, disgusting snow would stop.”

“Perhaps one of us will one day achieve happiness.”

“I hope it’s me.”

“For our queen’s sake, you should all hope it’s me.” Tyrion shoots back. He makes another mark on the parchment to his right, but it’s just a question mark. He’s still lost.

“You really think the queen’s safety rests on this?” Red Fly asks doubtfully, gesturing distastefully at the books and parchment in front of Tyrion.

“I think it’s very likely, yes,” Tyrion answers. “And I’ll have you know this can be just as dangerous as that.” He points at the spear propped up beside Red Fly’s chair.

“No. Not even close,” Red Fly argues. “That’s a lie people who can’t use this tell themselves.”

“And how am I meant to puzzle out the Three-Eyed Raven with a spear?”

“Easy,” Red Fly says. “You take the spear—and you do this.” He lifts it and throws it expertly across the library. It hits the dead-center of the stone wall, bouncing back with a noise that clatters around the peaceful place. Tyrion slaps his hand down on the table.

“Don’t throw spears in libraries,” he scolds. “And what—the wall’s meant to be Bran Stark?”

“Yes. That’s how you solve the Three-Eyed Raven problem. Easy.”

“How very barbaric of you,” Tyrion drawls. “I’m almost disappointed.”

“It’s not barbaric, not at all. If it’s true he’s doing what you said— trying to get our king to turn on
our queen, to kill her when she’s most vulnerable— it’s what he deserves. It’s justice.”

At times, Tyrion agrees with that assessment. But he doesn’t know enough to have decided fully either way. He needs some sort of confirmation that Bran can truly see in the future at will— some proof that Bran isn’t only saying that he can—and more knowledge on what, exactly, Bran can do. Without knowing all the tools at Bran’s disposal, Tyrion doesn’t think he and Jon will have any luck piecing together what Bran’s trying to orchestrate.

“What if he’s right? What if our queen loses control of herself and slaughters millions?”

“The millions will have deserved it.”

“Not if they’re innocent!”

“Our queen would never order them slaughtered if they’re innocent.”

“If she’s lost her mind!”

“You can’t lose your mind. It can’t go anywhere. And our queen has never acted unfairly or cruelly. She has always enforced justice.”

Tyrion shakes his head. “I wish I had your faith.”

“Had you been in chains your entire life and suddenly set free, you would.”

Tyrion peers towards the wall. “In many ways, being born an Imp was—”

“If you start that again, I’ll hit you with this spear. I miss when you were too awkward in your Valyrian to speak in full sentences.”

“The feeling, I assure you, is quite mutual,” Tyrion mutters, turning back to his text.

He works well past supper. Blue Rat brings both him and Red Fly a meal, though it’s the depressing fare Sansa’s been feeding to them due to, in her words, ‘food shortages’. Tyrion knows for a fact that Jon and Daenerys have twice sent food shipments North since House Targaryen retook the Iron Throne, but he’s not being permitted to speak with Sansa, so he can’t question her on that. And Jon, for his benefit, appears so unwell that he probably doesn’t even taste the state of the food he’s being given.

After they’ve eaten, Tyrion carefully returns the texts he’s been studying, and he and Red Fly make their way back to their chambers. Red Fly exchanges a few words with the soldiers they pass on the way, stopping to take two letters from one of Jon’s most trusted Northmen, a bannerman from House Cerwyn who is little older than sixteen.

“Sansa Stark attempted to receive these ravens, Lord Tyrion,” the boy says. “She wishes to speak with you and King Jon. She wasn’t happy she was being denied access to ‘her correspondence’.”

Tyrion glances up at the letters. Red Fly holds them out for him to take.

“Well, they’re not her correspondence,” Tyrion points out needlessly. “This one is addressed to the king, and this one…to the queen. That’s odd.”

Tyrion stares at Daenerys Stormborn written on the outside of the parchment. It was common knowledge that King Jon had gone north after the wedding while Queen Daenerys stayed south. Tyrion holds tightly to both letters.
“I’ll take these to King Jon straightaway.”

The soldiers look to Red Fly, who nods. Tyrion waits until they’re out of earshot to speak again.

“Queen Daenerys is still south, correct?” he mutters to Red Fly.

“We heard from Grey Worm this morning. As of then, yes, with no word that anything would change.”

“Hm,” Tyrion comments. The letters feel heavy in his hand. “I don’t suppose you’d let me go ahead and peak at these now ahead of the king?”

“I don’t suppose you’d let me hit you with my spear?”

“Fair.”

Jon isn’t in his chambers, the Great Hall, or even the glass gardens. Tyrion quickly grows worried by his absence. He’s got half a mind to ask Red Fly to start a search when Red Fly grabs his shoulder and turns him, pointing up. Tyrion spies Jon on the parapet. Relieved, he and Red Fly make their way up to him. Up close, he looks even worse than he’d looked yesterday: the bruises beneath his eyes are deep, his hair appears unwashed, his eyelids hang heavy. He maintains a grimace that makes it seem as if he’s constantly in pain. Tyrion can’t help but worry for him.

“These came,” Tyrion greets, passing him the letters. Jon looks at them and then sets to open one at once. Tyrion shakes his head firmly. “Not here.”

Jon holds up the one addressed to him. “This is Arya’s hand.”

“Still— not here,” Tyrion insists.

It’s the letter sent to Daenerys that has Tyrion so curious, but it’s Arya’s letter that preoccupies Jon’s thoughts. He waits until they’re in his chambers to open it, letting the other fall to the table carelessly as he unfolds the first. Tyrion stares at it, curiously burning within him, as Jon reads Arya’s raven.

Who would be sending a letter here, to Winterfell, addressed to Daenerys Stormborn, rather than Queen Daenerys?

He’s pulled from his thoughts by movement from the corner of his eye. He turns as Jon sinks down into a chair, a trembling hand disappearing into his hair, his eyes on the letter. Fear douses every bit of Tyrion’s previous curiosity.

“What?” he asks sharply. “What is it?”

He’s expecting the very worst. If he’s being honest with himself, he’s expecting news that the queen has lost the baby. That theory is only supported by how sick Jon looks, by the way his hand quakes as he hands the letter to Tyrion. Tyrion’s heart is pounding as he casts his eye upon it.

_Jon,

I did not want to worry you which is why I did not write sooner. There are no immediate threats here, but I need advice on how to fulfill my promise to you. I need your guidance. I have spent much time with the queen, and in that time, I feel confident that I have gotten to know her well. In the time that has followed, I have watched her become something different. It is not madness or violence, but fear— she cannot tell me where it comes from, but it is tormenting her. She eats little, sleeps little, and refuses to rest. Grey Worm stands guard outside her chambers each night, and he says, when she does sleep, she cries in her dreams._
I have asked her what it is that has frightened her, but she is either unwilling or unable to tell me. I worry for the baby.

She won’t take counsel from the maesters. Ser Davos did not want me to contact you; he says she just needs time, but I think she needs help. Write me back as soon as you can and advise me on this.

Your sister,

Arya

Tyrion, having expected much worse than that, is relieved. He looks up at Jon. He’s a bit baffled by the intensity of Jon’s reaction: he looks devastated, lost. Tormented.

“Perhaps she’s simply worried about you being here,” Tyrion suggests. He sets the letter down. “She misses you. It’s to be expected.”

Jon doesn’t say anything back to that. He presses his face into his hands, overcome with something that looks very much like hopelessness. Tyrion thinks he knows what Jon is thinking.

“Arya said it’s not madness,” he reminds Jon gently.

Tyrion knows that every conversation Bran and Jon have had thus far has consisted largely of Bran repeating: remember what I told you. Remember what I said. You’ll see it. Watch and see. Tyrion guesses that’s what he’s thinking of now.

“It sounds like madness,” Jon argues, lowering his hands. His pain is violent: Tyrion thinks, for a moment, that if Jon goes down, they’ll all go down with him. “It sounds exactly like what Bran’s been saying. It sounds exactly like what I’ve—” he stops. Tyrion doesn’t miss it.

“You’ve…what?” he asks curiously.

Jon stands. “Nevermind. I’m taking a walk. And in the morning, I’m returning to my wife.”

Tyrion objects at once. “Your queen needs you to stay here and see your task through. All the Northern lords are due to arrive by midday tomorrow to hear House Stark pledge their fealty to you, now and forevermore. You can’t leave now—”

“I can, and I will. Sansa will pledge fealty on behalf of House Stark tomorrow at dawn in front of whoever has made it here in time, or she’ll come South until she’s ready to do so at a later time.”

“Your queen needs—”

“My wife needs me.”

Tyrion is too afraid to say a word against that: Jon’s eyes look darker than usual, fiercer. Wilder. Violent. He tries a different approach.

“It’s dark. You should sleep.”

Jon snatches a cloak off the hook near the door. “I can’t sleep. I can’t eat. I can’t bloody think. The queen and I have that in common.”

He storms unsteadily from the room, and Tyrion— his eyes flashing quickly to the unread letter on the table— stands.

“Someone should go with him,” he tells Red Fly, infusing his words with urgency. “A couple guards, at least.”
Red Fly strides to the door, as concerned for their king as Tyrion sounds. “I’ll make sure they do. Stay here.”

“I won’t take a step,” Tyrion swears.

He sits calmly at the table until Red Fly walks from the doorway, and then his hands scramble for the letter addressed to Daenerys Stormborn. It’s too risky to take it with him, he knows, so he unfolds it and lets his eyes dance quickly over the words written in red ink. His excitement quickly dampens: it’s in High Valyrian, and complicated High Valyrian at that. It slows him down: the message isn’t long at all, but he’s having to translate it in his head as he reads it, and he’s unfamiliar with some of the words. The time has come to break chains with...he’s not sure, but he thinks the word that follows means false, untrue. A time has come to break chains with false family for there are terrors hidden within that seek to destroy the prince that was promised. All...another word he’s unsure of. He skips over it...has many parts, and the dragon has three heads. Guard yours, and look to the flames. The Lord of Light will guide.

Signed below, in the same red ink, by The High Priestess of The Red Temple of Volantis.

Tyrion looks quickly to the doorway. He doesn’t see or hear anyone, so he quickly scrambles for a bit of parchment, any parchment...he finally finds a letter on the bedside table, and a precursory look over it tells him it’s from Daenerys. He hurriedly goes to rip off the blank part at the bottom of the parchment, trying to be as neat as possible, but ends up taking nearly half of what Daenerys has written. Frustrated with himself, and hoping Jon won’t notice its disappearance, he resigns himself to taking the full letter. He flips the parchment over to the back and sits with the letter from Volantis. Quickly, he transcribes it as best he can in the Common Tongue, making sure to quickly scrawl the High Valyrian words he’s unfamiliar with. He’s just made it to he last line—guard yours, and look to the flames—when he hears heavy steps approaching. He rolls Daenerys’s letter to Jon—the Priestesses’ translation on the back in his own hand—and pushes it down the front of his jerkin, tucking it safely into an inside pocket. He has to take a few deep breaths, but by the time Red Fly enters, he manages a serene smile.

“Well?” he asks Red Fly.

“I’ve never seen him so angry. He’s talking to Sansa now.”

“Oh, well,” Tyrion says, sighing. “I suppose it’s time those two screamed it out.” He stands; the letter stuffed inside his jerkin crinkles a bit. “I’m ready to retire.”

He readies for bed, moving the letter to his bedclothes, and lies still and quiet until Red Fly thinks he’s asleep. As soon as Red Fly steps outside his chambers, he gets up, pads to the window, and sits in the windowsill with the letter in hand. The moon provides meager light, but he’s able to read most of what he’s written.

The time has come to break chains with—false? untrue?—family for there are terrors hidden within that seek to destroy the prince that was promised. All—has many parts, and the dragon has three heads. Guard yours, and look to the flames.

He scribbles in the part he hadn’t had time to write, but remembers. The Lord of Light will guide.

He studies the words he’s unfamiliar with, struggling to pull some long-lost vocabulary lesson to the forefront of his mind. But if he’s ever learned these words, he can’t recall. He’s not even wholly confident in his translation of all the other words, either. He’s as far from understanding this as he is from understanding those runes.
Frustrated, he flips the letter over. He knows he shouldn’t—he knows it’s impolite, inappropriate, mildly treasonous—but he can’t help but let his eyes rove over the queen’s hand. He’s already stolen it, and considering the king thought highly enough of it to keep it at his bedside, he’s certain Jon will eventually notice it’s missing. He’ll be in trouble if he’s found out. Might as well read it so he knows what he’ll be in trouble for.

Jon,

All sickhouses have been fully restored—I have Ser Davos to thank, he fought as hard as I did to do what needed to be done to rectify the situation at once. I regret how upset I must have sounded in my last raven; repairs were taking longer than I expected, and I feared it would take even longer. You know how I feel about matters such as these. I did not intend to alarm you. Yes, everything is fine.

We are discussing opening a ‘scholarhouse’ in Flea Bottom, a place where scholars and maesters might gather to teach any child who wants to learn. Reading, arithmetic, languages, sciences, even rudimentary healing skills. Ser Davos thinks, if we do, we should wait until at least two-thirds of all our repairs on other structures are complete, but I feel as if we should prioritize it. That way, all children have a safe place to go during the day while restoration continues. What do you think?

On the topic of scholars and lessons, Arya and Grey Worm continue to tutor me in the peculiar art of combat. I have made little improvement since I last wrote to you, but Grey Worm did agree to train with me yesterday for the first time since we started—he typically refuses—so I suppose that means I have learned enough now to hold my own in some small manner. It is all a bit ridiculous... your Northern soldiers watch us with a look of utter horror. I do believe their hearts stop in their chests every time Arya or Grey Worm block me. Ridiculous...but I think that is why we do it. Grey Worm needs a distraction, Arya needs a distraction, and me, as well.

I have been teasing Arya that next I will return the favor and teach her something, referring quite obviously to dragonriding. She tries desperately to hide her excitement and eagerness every time I bring it up. I think she fears I will not follow through on it, but I intend to. I want you to be here, though.

I cannot write of how much I miss you. The ink could not do it justice, and it will do little to lessen the ache for either of us. I shall try to dream of kissing you instead. Should I manage it, I believe I will stay in bed just a bit longer in the morning.

Dany

Tyrion cares little to examine all the reasons why, but after he finishes the letter, he bows his head and he cries.

IX.

Jon only has to knock once.

Sansa opens the door to her chambers as if she’d known he was coming, still fully dressed, her face cool.

“Yes?” she asks.

“Tomorrow morning, in front of whichever Northern lords have arrived early, you will bend the knee to House Targaryen. Afterwards, you will travel South to meet with the queen and I, and we will discuss the future of House Stark. In the meantime, the Northern seat will be moved to House Hornwood, with Lord Hornwood acting as Warden of the North.” Sansa parts her lips, but Jon
presses on. “I will not negotiate with you. You and Bran threatened to march on King’s Landing against the queen. I could—and should—have your heads for that treason, and not one Northern lord would speak against me for it.”

The anger churning within him might have once made him feel uncomfortable, afraid, but he feels at home now in the flickering heat of it. He almost feels free. The way he sees it, his misery is almost done. If Bran is right about Dany going mad, Jon’s going mad, too, and he has every intention of going home and going mad right alongside her. If it is truly madness, soon they won’t know what they’re missing. And if Bran was deceiving him about Dany going mad, all his deception will come to an end, as Jon has every intention of setting for the Kingsroad tomorrow by midday, no matter what Bran says, no matter what happens.

“That’s not true. House Glover does not recognize the Dragon Queen. Lord Royce does not bend his knee to her. Nor do the twenty-six men from other Northern house stationed within our walls right now.”

“Then five-hundred men from House Glover and your twenty-six betrayers and deserters can die needlessly for you. And Lord Royce, too, with whatever men he might be able to convince to turn against the Vale, which has already pledged to House Targaryen. One-tenth of our army could defeat those numbers within an hour. But you already know that, Sansa.”

She looks stubbornly to the side, but he can tell she’s upset. He wishes he felt something for her—wishes he felt bad for her, wishes he felt guilty for the way things had turned out—but he can’t feel anything but impatience to get on with it.

“I know Bran’s been telling you things. That I’ll turn against Daenerys and make you Queen in the North. That the queen is evil and set to destroy the world. That I have to betray her. I can’t say for sure what Bran sees…but I can tell you what I am sure of, and what I am sure of is that the North has no fight here. There is nothing to be won. You can’t do it, Sansa. You don’t have the numbers, the support, or the reason. The North has had to accept two food shipments from us already, and it’s not even the worst of the weather. Should our fellow northmen die because you don’t like Daenerys? Should children starve because you don’t like Daenerys?”

“She’s not one of us—”

“She is. Because I married her—because she’s my family. And even if I hadn’t married her, even if we’d never discovered my true identity, she’s more than proved herself to the North. You’re the only one who can’t see that.”

Sansa turns away from him. She stares at the fire, her posture tense.

“I believe Bran,” she tells him. But to Jon, she sounds uncertain.

“I can’t tell you not to. But that’s not Bran, Sansa. You know it as much as I do. Bran is dead. Bran is never coming back. We will never see Bran again. Nor Robb, nor Rickon, nor Father.” He feels his own throat tighten. Sansa’s head bows, her back still to him. “Maybe you think if only you can get all the Starks back in Winterfell that things will go back to how they were. That things will be safe again. But they won’t. They won’t ever be the way they were. We’ve all got to come to terms with that. If you thought power would get you the security you lost the day Father died, you were wrong. You’re just going to have to find safety elsewhere.”

She turns to look at him, but pain has surged once more in Jon’s mind, and he hardly sees her. He reaches up to press over his eyes, struggling against the pain. He guesses he’s gone so long without sleep that now the terrible thoughts are coming during the day…as he stares at the fire, he sees a brief
flash of Queen Rhaella’s bloody thighs, and he hears a sickeningly familiar scream. The sound makes him bow forward slightly as if he’s been struck.

“Are you all right?”

Jon ignores Sansa’s question. Because he’s not all right. He needs to get outside in the cold air— his head feels fit to burst into flames.

“Tomorrow, Sansa. Prepare to give your statement of fealty,” Jon warns.

He makes it to the door before she responds.

“Then what will you do? Go back to King’s Landing?” she demands.

He doesn’t turn around. He squeezes his eyes shut against the pressure building behind them.

“Yes. Of course.”

“Leaving me here, the only Stark in Winterfell. The last Stark.”

He resists the urge to squeeze his own head between his hands. He grits his teeth against the pain.

“Bran’s here.”

“Bran isn’t Bran. I thought we both agreed on that. Bran…he spends more time flying around in the heads of ravens than he spends talking to me.”

“The heads of…—” Jon breaks off with an audible gasp of pain. He doubles over at the waist, overcome with agony so great it strikes the air from his lungs. He’s filled with a primal desperation to make the pain stop, just make it stop—he leaves Sansa’s chambers without another word, pushing quickly through his guards, desperate to get outside. He’s half-blind with pain, stumbling over snowdrifts, narrowly avoiding walls and carts and people—

The snow bites hard into his knees as he falls to the ground. He doubles over at the waist and vomits into the snow so forcefully that he becomes lightheaded. He falls forward, his forehead pressing into the sick-melted snow, gasping with pain— every type of pain. Physical pain clenched around his brain. Fear. Disgust— the visions overcome him again, and for a second, he thinks he could slit his own throat with Longclaw and just be happy to be free from them— screaming, so many voices, hers the worst, begging, begging— I’ve never begged for anything, but I’m begging you now— please, please, don’t— please—

A howl. Plaintive, close. Jon hears it, but he can’t lift his head. He’s certain he’s dying, certain his brain is on fire, certain he will never get up from this snow. He’ll never see Dany again. He’ll never meet his child. He’ll have failed them. He can’t fight the things he sees behind his closed eyes anymore. He has no strength left. Right when he’s about to give in and sink into sleep—death— madness— right there in the snow, he feels something wet and familiar against the back of his neck. There’s a burst of moist, warm air, the caress of fur. Jon knows who it is like he knows his own heart.

“Ghost,” he groans, his lips still pressed to the bitter snow.

Ghost nudges his side hard. Once, twice. Three times. By the fourth, Jon is focusing more on that nudge than the faraway sounds of shouting. He presses his palms flat to the snowy ground and forces himself to think about the sting of the snow, the frigid dampness seeping to his knees, the bite of the wind on his exposed nose. Then: the acrid taste of vomit on his tongue, the bile in his hair, the way his entire body is trembling.
He sits up. Right as he processes where he is— on the ground just outside the main wall— he hears his men hurrying towards him. By the time they make it to him, Jon’s got his hand in Ghost’s fur, and he’s using him to help rise. Ghost plants himself at Jon’s side, and Jon doesn’t remove his hand from his fur. As long as he focuses on the texture of his fur against his palm, he can’t focus on the horrible thoughts just at the edges of his mind, still trying to take him over.

“Get the maester at once,” one of his Northern soldiers orders another. Jon doesn’t argue: he can hardly stand, and if Ghost weren’t here, he’d still be doubled over in his own puddle of sick. But he’s not optimistic that the maester can help him. He looks down at Ghost, and he thinks: you know I’m dying. That’s why you came. That’s why you found me. You could sense it.

Ghost shuffles closer to him, practically leaning into Jon’s legs now. Jon tightens his hand in Ghost’s fur. Go south, he thinks, hoping Ghost can still sense what he needs. Go to them. Never leave.

If only he could get into Ghost’s head completely, if only he could—

“Bran isn’t Bran. I thought we both agreed on that. Bran…he spends more time flying around in the heads of ravens than he spends talking to me.”

Jon feels as if everything stops. As soon as he has the thought, he freezes, and then the onslaught against his mind continues with renewed vigor. He latches onto one phrase, clinging to it, repeating it over and over in his mind to keep from focusing on the nightmares lurking…heads of ravens, heads of ravens, heads of ravens, flying in the heads of ravens…

“Your Grace? Have you taken ill?” the Maester asks.

Jon hasn’t even noticed he’s arrive. He hasn’t realized it’s been long enough for him to make it to him. He peers blearily at him.

“No,” Jon lies. “I just need fresh air. I’m going to walk.”

“I don’t think—”

“I’m going to walk.”

And walk he does, his fist still in Ghost’s fur, his feet never seeming to touch the snow. Or perhaps he just can’t feel them. His head is churning again, but this time, they’re all his own thoughts. Every terrible vision he’d been plagued with every night for over a month. Every headache that had ripped his brain in two. Every word Bran had said to him about Targaryen madness and its signs. Every word Arya had written about Dany, about her crying in her sleep, being tormented with fear over something she couldn’t speak of, not eating, not sleeping—

If Bran could fly in the heads of ravens, he could thread their heads with poison.

For the first time since all of this started, Jon thinks he understands what’s happening to him. He thinks he knows who’s to blame.

And he has never, once in his life, been angrier.

At his side, Ghost snarls into the night, his hackles standing straight up against Jon’s hand.

X.

He has no facts. He is sure of nothing. But he does have rage.
Because he’s the king, no one stops him. Not one person pushes in front of him as he makes his way to Bran’s chambers. It’s for the best: Jon feels so unhinged that he thinks he may hurt anyone who tries to step in front of him, anyone who tries to hold him back. And at his side, Ghost growls continuously, the sound low at the back of this throat.

Bran might have been waiting for Jon for how calm he looks. He turns his chair and watches expressionlessly as Jon approaches. Jon looms over him; he thinks his head may still hurt, but he’s so far gone that he can’t even feel the pain of it.

“Hello, Jon,” Bran greets.

Jon’s hands close on the arms of Bran’s wheelchair. He tugs once, hard, pulling Bran closer to him. Bran looks slowly down at Jon’s hands and then looks back up, waiting.

“Tell me what you want. Tell me what you’re trying to do. Now!”

Ghost growls louder, prowling around Jon and Bran, hackles up and head low.

Bran blinks. “I’ve told you. I’m trying to stop Daenerys Targaryen.”

“Stop her from doing what? Stop what?!”

“From destroying—”

“STOP LYING!”

Ghost snarls and snaps, his teeth nearly making contact with Bran’s hand. Bran doesn’t even move it. He turns and looks at Ghost as if he’s only just realized he’s there, and then he looks back at Jon.

“You’re frustrated, scared. That’s okay. Soon, everything will make sense. You’ll know what you need to do. You already do.”

Jon shakes his head. He can hear his pulse pounding in his head. He knows, if he lets up on his rage even a bit, he’ll hear those horrible visions. See those horrible visions. His head is not his own.

“I don’t,” he tells Bran through gritted teeth. “I don’t!”

“You do,” Bran counters. Jon’s fingers clench around the arms of the wheelchair, squeezing hard in his anger. He lets go, shoving forward as he does, and Bran slides back a few feet before knocking into the table. Jon paces the floor, hands going to his hair, fighting to ignore the sounds of King Aerys’s laughter racing through his brain, the sounds of Queen Rhaella’s choked sobs. It seems to get louder with each second, and the pain returns, fierce and gripping.

There’s a slight pause, and when Bran presses on, his voice sounds different. For the first time, Jon realizes, it sounds hateful.

“You know, Jon. You were born knowing. Targaryen men have always known what to do with Targaryen women. They’ve always found a place for them, a purpose. You know that well. You know what to do with her, with Daenerys. You’ve seen it every night.”

Jon falls still, and Ghost, too.

He stands with his back to Bran, his eyes closed. He can hear his heartbeat and little else. For a second, he counts the beats: one, two, three, four…

His fingers wrap around the pommel of Longclaw. He squeezes his hand so tightly that he can feel
the mouth of the direwolf cutting into the flesh of his palm. He hears Ghost growl, low and building, and then he spins around. He has Longclaw unsheathed and at Bran’s throat in an instant. He presses it so tight to his skin that blood beads near the blade, his eyes staring hard into the Three-Eyed Raven’s, heart pounding so hard it almost seems to cease beating at all.

“You’ve been in my head,” he growls. He increases the pressure on Longclaw: the blood thickens. “You’ve been in Dany’s head. Admit it! ADMIT IT! TELL ME WHAT YOU’VE TORMENTED HER WITH—I KNOW WHAT SICK THINGS YOU’VE PLANTED IN MY HEAD—”

“I’ve only ever shown you both what you are. Nothing more.”

It’s his serenity that flips the coin. Ghost snarls, and Jon leans forward, pressing harder with Longclaw, prepared to kill him right now for what he’s done, for the things he’s said, for the visions he’s made Jon live through nightly, the things he’s made Dany live through—

But in the second before he slits the Three-Eyed Raven’s throat, he locks eyes with him. And with a wave of pain, he sees Bran. Not this Bran. Bran Bran. Young, happy, adventurous. For a second—just a second—he’s standing in the snow with Bran, and they’re both impossibly young, and Bran is looking at him with hope as Jon tries to convince Ned Stark to let them keep the direwolf pups they’ve just found. Looking at Jon like he holds the answers to the world.

His hand weakens. He moves Longclaw back, not even realizing that he is, and it almost works. He almost turns to leave, head aching, heart sore. But Ghost pushes against Jon’s side again, insistent, and Jon looks once more at Bran. He’s watching Jon, a cool smile on his face.

And Jon doesn’t bring Longclaw back to Bran’s throat.

He brings the flat side of the blade down on the top of his head, right where Jon’s own head has been aching for over a month without reprieve.

He knows the second Bran—the Three-Eyed Raven—loses consciousness because he feels as if a weight has been lifted from his brain. The relief is so great that Jon stumbles against Ghost, taken aback by the intensity of it. He takes a few shaky steps back from Bran, marveling at the hunger that suddenly floods his gut, the wave of peace that washes over his thoughts.

He cares not when men suddenly burst in, presumably fearing the noise they heard was a slight against the king. His guards hurry over to Bran. Jon ignores every voice and every question but one.

“Jon?” Tyrion demands from the doorway. “What did you do?!”

Jon wipes Longclaw’s blade with his sleeve.

“I handled it.” He sheaths Longclaw and turns to face Tyrion and Red Fly. “We’re leaving at dawn. Half our troops will remain here to ensure Sansa pledges fealty in front of the Northern lords like she’s been instructed. The Three-Eyed Raven comes with us.” Jon starts to walk to the door, Ghost at his side, but he stops. He turns back around and meets Red Fly’s eyes. “If he wakes, you’re to put him out again. I don’t care how. Keep him asleep, but do not kill him. We’re not done talking.”

Tyrion’s voice follows Jon out into the corridor.

“Where are you going?!”

Jon doesn’t turn around. “To bed.”

He doesn’t bother removing anything but Longclaw and his boots. He falls into his bed, Ghost
curled at his feet, and closes his eyes. For the first time in the longest time, there’s nothing there but silence and darkness. For the first time in the longest time, he sees Dany’s smile.

XI.

Back in King’s Landing, Daenerys wakes on the edge of a nightmare.

It had been bad— she’s sure of it. She can feel tightness where tears have dried on her cheeks and dampness on her pillow. But whatever caused it recedes, sinking back until it’s gone entirely, leaving quiet in its place.

She tells herself not to go back to sleep because she’s learned that only brings fiercer terrors. But peace laps at the edges of her mind, lulling her head back to the pillow. She rolls over onto her side, her hand finding the swell of her stomach beneath the covers, and she lets out a sigh as she feels the life beneath her hand flutter.

As sleep takes her again, she dreams of the lovely-dark, a three-headed dragon, and exploding stars.
The Lord of Light

Chapter Notes

Thank you from the bottom of my heart to those who commented and left kudos! I tried to have this chapter out sooner, but things got a bit hectic. Thanks for your patience!

I.

Arya sleeps little that night.

When she does sleep, it’s deep and dreamless, but she wakes often, peering impatiently at the window when she does.

She’s waiting for the first light of dawn, for when she can continue her duties. But dawn can’t come quickly enough. If Arya could have wrung the darkness out of the sky and replaced night with day, she would have. Could she have stayed in the corridor all night, she would have.

“Go sleep,” Grey Worm had asked of her last night, standing rigidly outside the queen’s chambers. “I will watch tonight. I will protect her.”

Arya had been reluctant. The queen’s day had been particularly horrible, to the point that she’d been afraid to leave her—to the point that she’d written to Jon despite the queen’s Hand ordering her not to, consequences be damned. And it wasn’t that she didn’t trust Grey Worm; she had an inordinate amount of respect and trust for him. In all the time she’d been here in King’s Landing—over to two months now—she had never seen him walk back on a promise and had never seen him let anyone down. She knew he meant it when he said he’d keep watch, but she wanted to be there, too. The sense of foreboding that had washed over her earlier that day at the sight of the queen refusing all food and taking to her chambers by midday had chilled her to the bone. She felt things would take a turn for the worse very soon now. And going by how pale and weak the queen had seemed by dusk yesterday, it would be before Jon returned.

She worries, tosses, turns. She’s slept in many places much worse than her current chambers and shouldered nights much darker than this one, but that doesn’t change the weight of her worry. She doesn’t want to fail Jon. If she’s being honest with herself, she doesn’t want to fail the queen, either—though she’d never admit it out loud.

When the first light of dawn paints the Maidenvault stones crimson, Arya swings her feet to the floor, laces her boots, and grabs Needle. She never changed from her clothes so she’s out of her chambers in less than two minutes, surprisingly alert despite her lack of sleep. Her stomach clenches with hunger, but she is certainly not going to wait for a tray to be brought to her, nor for the Maidenvault cooks to begin making the morning meal.

Her chambers are only a short walk from Queen Daenerys’s. She can usually see Grey Worm’s silhouette standing sentry outside her door from the moment she turns the curved corridor, but today, she doesn’t see anybody. Her hand finds Needle’s hilt and her pace quickens.

She’s half-expecting to find a body. So when she stops in front of the queen’s slightly-ajar door and hears laughter, she’s thrown enough to freeze. She can hear amused conversation weaving between
Daenerys and Grey Worm, though they’re speaking in Valyrian, and Arya’s vocabulary is too limited to help her grasp what’s being said. The laughter threaded through their sentences tells her all she needs to know, though.

She knocks lightly with her knuckles before pushing the door all the way open. Both Daenerys and Grey Worm turn. Grey Worm says something to Arya, as does Daenerys, but Arya’s too busy looking at the food set between them to process what they’ve said.

“You’re eating,” Arya blurs.

Grey Worm smiles; it lights up his entire face. The plate in front of Queen Daenerys has been picked almost entirely clean: there’s a small remaining piece of crusty, fresh-baked bread, a few leftover flakes of goat cheese, and a couple slices of baked apple dressed in cinnamon. There’s even a second tray in the middle of the table between Grey Worm and Daenerys as if they’d sent for seconds.

“Here,” Daenerys says, reaching for the uneaten food in the middle. “Come sit and have breakfast with us.”

Arya practically trips over her words in her rush to object.

“No, that’s fine, Your Grace. I already ate,” she lies. She walks over and sits in the third chair, though. The smell of the fresh-baked bread makes her stomach clench again. “It looks too good to waste. You should eat more of it so it isn’t thrown.”

Daenerys is the one who needs it. Arya is unwilling to take any for herself. But the queen arches her eyebrows in response to Arya’s words, reaches for a thick slice of warm bread, and smears a generous amount of honeyed goat cheese on it wordlessly, holding it out to Arya when she’s done. It doesn’t pass Arya’s notice how odd it feels to be fed by the queen. She almost feels dirty for it, unnatural. She’s never been one to grovel towards royalty, but there’s something so undeniably regal about Daenerys that she can’t help but feel both humbled and flattered to have her dressing her bread for her.

She is reminded, of course, that Daenerys grew up on the run, quite like Arya had spent the most impressionable years of her young life. This queen who carried herself with the power of a thousand kings had not grown up waited on hand-and-foot.

“I could only indulge in a second meal if the queen does as well,” Arya comments, doing her best to put on a respectful—yet imploring—tone.

Grey Worm makes a comment in Valyrian that makes the queen laugh again. She turns her smile to Arya once her laughter’s fizzled out, her violet eyes dancing.

“Very well,” she says, still smiling. She reaches for another piece of bread herself.

Satisfied, Arya bites into the bread she’s been given, her taste buds lighting up immediately. She guesses the kitchen girls were just as overjoyed to hear the queen requesting food as she was to see her eating it. They’ve truly outdone themselves: the goat cheese is the perfect balance of creamy, tart, and sweet, and the bread has a salty, thick crust that breaks to reveal soft, airy bread that practically melts on the tongue. Arya doesn’t say it to Daenerys, but she knows this meal is an act of love. She has no doubts that the women who made it love their queen, that they’ve worried for her all this time. She makes a mental note to go down to the kitchens to make sure they know just how much the queen enjoyed it.

As they chat over their meal, Arya discovers why the queen’s in such a pleasant mood: she’d slept
the night prior. Arya glances at Grey Worm after Daenerys makes a comment about it, and he gives her a discreet nod to verify it. Arya thinks she knows what happened: she sits up taller, her heart rising with pride.

“Jon wrote to you, didn’t he?” she asks Daenerys. “He sent a raven last night?”

Daenerys’s brow furrows just slightly. “No.” There’s a slight pause. Her lips turn down in concern, her smile slinking off to whatever shadows it’d been hiding in the past couple of weeks. “Why? Has something happened?”

“No,” Arya says quickly, wishing she’d said nothing, wishing she’d go back to smiling. “I just wondered if he had. I’m sure you’ll hear from him soon.” Fearing Daenerys will realize she’d gone behind her back and sent a raven to Jon, she changes the topic. “Are we going to give audience to the people today?”

“Yes,” Daenerys says. The fire in her eyes is back. Arya thinks she’s slightly mad for it. There’s little in life as grueling as sitting in one place taking complaint after complaint after complaint, but the queen seems to find it rewarding. “I thought we might practice before the courtyard opens to the people, though.”

Arya’s hesitant. As much as she enjoys giving Daenerys lessons in Water Dancing, it’s becoming more and more stressful the further along she gets her pregnancy. She’s visibly pregnant now, her stomach round and pronounced beneath her silks, and Arya’s heart rests somewhere near her toes every time Needle so much as grazes the air above her stomach. She trusts in her own control over Needle, but she can’t trust that Daenerys, a beginner, won’t make some stupid movement and end up hurting herself.

The soldiers’ presence only complicates matters. They watch Arya’s every move like a hawk watching prey, growing fiercer in their protection of Dany everyday— particularly the Northmen, whom Arya guesses see Daenerys more as regal Queen Daenerys than the Breaker of Chains. Arya can’t blame them. Even she has to admit a universal truth: Daenerys is absolutely captivating. In some manner, she’s adorable. There’s no way she’d ever tell a woman as powerful as Daenerys that she’s adorable— she doesn’t think she’d like it much to hear it— but she is. The swell of her belly, growing bigger every day, adds a certain softness to her ethereal beauty, one that incites even more love and devotion from the smallfolk (and certainly the same from her armies). She has, in truth, taken something that should make her weaker or more vulnerable, and come out more powerful for it.

“So you think it’s wise?” Arya hedges.

Daenerys’s hand settles atop her stomach. “Yes. She’s quite all right. She’s well-protected. We can go back to wooden swords, though, if you’re worried.”

Arya’s surprised by the shock that courses through her, starting in her heart and journeying to her gut. When warmth takes its place, she realizes it’s excitement. Happiness.

“She?” Arya asks.

She’s never heard Daenerys speak of her baby like that in all the time Jon’s been gone. She’s hardly heard her speak of the baby at all unless someone else brings it up first. It makes it seem real to Arya; she catches herself looking at Daenerys’s stomach and trying to picture a baby curled up just beneath her skin, one with tufts of hair dark as Jon’s and eyes as violet as Daenerys’s.

She’s smiling. She wants to work the smile off her own face because she’s embarrassed of it, but she
can't get it to go away. She’s suddenly thinking of her brother holding that dark-haired, violet-eyed infant, and it brings her more joy than she’d ever expected it might.

Daenerys hasn’t missed Arya’s smile. She’s not dull, Jon’s wife. She’s sharp. Forceful. Persistent. All things Arya respects in her own self, too.

“She,” Daenerys affirms. She strokes her hand down the front of her belly and then back up. For some reason, the sight makes Arya’s throat tighten. “Rhaella, I think. For my mother. Or perhaps Lyanna, for Jon’s.”

As they finish breakfast, the three of them hardly go a moment without a smile in place.

II.

“Why did you ask if Jon had written me?”

Arya effortlessly blocks Daenerys’s sword, backing up a few steps as she advances. The force and swiftness of her strikes have increased, but she still lacks the fluidity that would make her moves sudden and effective. Arya shifts her own weight forward, moving her sword carefully Daenerys’s way with intentional sluggishness: Daenerys turns her sword to the side and blocks her.

“He has,” Daenerys says. She suddenly thrusts her sword forward— Arya had gotten a bit distracted trying to think of what to say next, and the wooden point of the sword nearly touches her cheek. She quickly moves Needle up in a half-circle and pushes against Daenerys’s. Daenerys resists.

She tries a subject change. She studies Daenerys’s face as she continues to resist Arya’s attempts to disarm her. “Don’t grimace. Don’t show me how hard you’re working to keep your sword up. If your opponent sees that struggle, they’ll work even harder, thinking they’re close to defeating you.”

Daenerys’s face goes even at once, all strain smoothing out as quickly as thin cotton absorbs water. If it weren’t for the loose hair wildly framing her face, she would appear no different than how she looks sitting on the throne.

“Good,” Arya praises. She increases her pressure just a bit, and Daenerys matches it. “Now slide your blade up so it’s touching the upper-midpoint of mine— yes, there. Now I want you to let up on your fight just a bit—”

Daenerys doesn’t question that. She does it at once; Arya feels the resisting force against her own blade ease.

“Now, quickly slam your sword back against that point I showed you a second ago, and use the force of that blow to push my sword in an upper—” Arya stops when she realizes Daenerys knows what to do and begins doing it, forcing Arya’s blade over in an arch, finally forcing it low enough that she can re-advance anew. Arya blocks her next advance easily enough, but she’s a bit preoccupied by a feeling she can’t name. Pride, she realizes eventually.

“You’re a quick learner,” Arya admits later, when they’ve both stopped to drink from a pot of cool mint tea.

“I didn’t have a choice to be anything else growing up. I’ve had to be a quick learner. It helps that you’re a great instructor, too.”
Arya hides her pleased smile into her teacup. She thinks perhaps she is, and that’s surprising to her. It feels nice to discover a new talent. It makes her feel like there might be more about herself she’s yet to discover, more that she can take forward with her into whatever new life she builds.

“You’re still decades from being able to beat Jon in a fight, but you could hold your own against some.”

“Surely you jest,” Daenerys says, quirking a brow. “Jon would drop his sword the moment I lifted mine.”

Arya’s eyes drop to the soft curve of her stomach, visible beneath the blue silk of her dress. She concedes the point at once.

“Yes, you’re right,” she admits. “Many would, in fact.”

“Not all, though,” Daenerys says. It’s foreboding enough to bring Arya’s mind back to yesterday (and all the days before it). She doesn’t know if bringing the past up is the right thing to do, but she can’t help it.

“You seem to be better today. Has the fear gone?”

Daenerys smiles, but it’s an odd smile. Arya thinks to herself that it’s a smile masquerading for a frown.

“No. But now it’s simply fear of that fear. I’m certain that makes little sense— I wish I knew how to explain it because I would— I would explain it to you, if I could. I owe you that much. But I can’t say what possessed me… I can’t explain the terror that I felt, every moment of every day. I feel much better now— lighter— but I’m frightened for when that terror comes back. I don’t even know what made it leave.”

Arya wishes she did. She wishes she knew so she could make sure to do whatever it was the next time the fear returned.

“Perhaps it won’t come back,” Arya suggests, but she thinks of how intense Daenerys’s torment had been. It seems unlikely that whatever caused that would fizzle out and disappear completely.

Daenerys looks up suddenly, and Arya does, too. They watch as Drogon cuts through the blue sky, quiet and swift as night. Arya still can’t help but stare at him in wonder for a few quiet moments. No matter how often she sees him, she still finds herself breathless.

“I think she’s okay, though, and that makes everything else bearable. That’s all I asked the gods for everyday this past month…I just wanted her to be safe.”

Arya looks over at Daenerys at those words. Her eyes are soft with love, still cast up towards Drogon, and her hand in on her stomach. Arya feels that strange feeling again— like her heart is widening to twice the size it’d been before. She imagines that infant again, inky-haired and violet-eyed, and she realizes fully that it would be her niece. Maybe not by blood, but in every way that mattered. Jon’s daughter. Her family.

Arya’s turning her eyes back to the sky when she feels the queen’s fingers touch her hand, hesitant yet steady. Arya looks down. Her heart goes to her throat as Daenerys wraps her hand around Arya’s. She’s not sure what to do or say— it feels intense to be on the receiving end of this softness, this trust, and Arya suddenly understand how Jon could bend the knee as quickly as he had. And then Daenerys pulls on her hand gently, guiding it over, pressing it firmly to the front of her stomach. Arya’s fingers flex and open of their own accord, so her hand is pressed palm-down, and Daenerys
holds her hand there gently.

Arya has never been at such a loss for words. She’s torn between feeling honored and wanting to shy away from the closeness, the intimacy, out of fear of not being able to rise to meet the intensity of it. Under all that is curiosity, though: she’s never touched a pregnant stomach before that she can remember, and she’s surprised by how firm it feels beneath the soft coolness of the silk.

“Can you feel it?” Daenerys asks Arya.

Arya isn’t sure what she’s supposed to be feeling. Her stomach? It’d be difficult not to, with her hand pressed to it. She feels little else beyond the fabric of her silk dress, the warmth of her skin beneath it, and the slight rise and fall of her breathing.

“I don’t think so,” Arya admits, her voice hushed.

Daenerys’s hand falls off Arya’s and rests in her lap. “I suppose it’s too early.” She sounds disappointed. Maybe that’s why Arya doesn’t move her hand right away. She sits for a couple moments longer with her hand there, waiting, growing used to the curve of it beneath her palm. When Arya worries she’s kept her hand on the queen too long, she pulls it back, a bit sheepish.

“I can feel her moving,” Daenerys explains, her own hand returning to her stomach. “I thought perhaps you’d be able to, too.”

Arya’s mostly just touched that she’d want her to, though she doesn’t say that. She does, though, say: “I don’t know if I’d even know what it was if I did feel it.”

The queen’s regality often feels like a barrier, one Arya can sometimes peek through but can never fully step past. But she realizes now why it’d felt so jarring when her hand had been pressed to her stomach: that was completely beyond the barrier, completely beyond the wall. That was Daenerys—not the queen. In a way Arya was sure many people alive beyond Jon had never seen.

There’s a certain bravery in her vulnerability, one Arya can’t help but admire. And for the first time since arriving down South, Arya feels that Daenerys truly trusts her—truly values her.

“I’ll let you try next time, if you’d like,” Daenerys offers, straightening and looking back towards the Maidenvault. Her air of authority returns all at once, and Arya can’t say for sure where it comes from—if it’s unintentional or some aura Daenerys can command at will—but she goes from Daenerys to Queen Daenerys in a matter of seconds.

The reason for that shift becomes evident moments later when Arya spots Ser Davos headed towards them. As he stops in front of them, Arya sees he’s holding a rolled length of paper.

“Good morning, Your Grace,” Ser Davos greets.

“It truly is,” Daenerys replies. She smiles, but she holds her hand out immediately, waiting for what Ser Davos clearly brought her.

“From Jon,” Ser Davos says, setting the letter in her palm. “Arrived just now.”

Arya casts her eyes to the ground. Guilt washes over her. She’s certain Jon’s letter is about what Arya had written him; at the time, Arya had felt she was right to go to him. But now, she wonders if Daenerys might view it as a betrayal. She had never forbidden Arya from writing to Jon with information about her deteriorating state, but Arya hadn’t checked with her before doing so, either.

With the length of the paper and how long the queen reads, Arya knows Jon’s written a good
amount. But come the end of it, the queen rolls the paper back up, looks at Ser Davos, and simply says: “The king is returning. They departed Winterfell at dawn.”

Arya’s guilt morphs quickly to apprehension.

“What?” Ser Davos asks, troubled. “They’re due to meet with the Northern lords tonight. Is he sure leaving now is wise? Did he say why, Your Grace?”

Arya can sense Ser Davos’s gaze. She can’t meet his eyes or look at Daenerys. She’s certain Jon’s told her about the letter, certain that whatever trust she’d seen in Daenerys’s eyes earlier would disappear behind that barrier once more. And what would Jon think when he came all this way, sabotaging what he’d gone North for in the first place, just to find Daenerys doing fine? Would he believe that she’d been as bad as Arya had reported? Even if he believed her— he hadn’t seen it, and seeing it was very different from hearing of it.

“He says all problems North have been handled for the time being,” Daenerys answers shortly. She seems preoccupied. Arya notices that her fingers have clenched so tightly around the letter that she’s at risk of crushing it. “Is that all, Ser Davos?”

“No, Your Grace. I have the recent discharge report in the council room for you to look over at your leisure. Three Dothraki men— Tuzo being one of them— and two Unsullied have given their goodbyes.”

Daenerys nods. “Be sure they’re paid in full before their departure date. Have they said where they’re going?”

“Yes— Tuzo is going back to Essos, but the rest are hoping to find a home here in Westeros, to settle down.”

“And I hope they do,” Daenerys says genuinely.

It’s one area Arya doesn’t fully agree with the queen. She had given a speech two weeks prior thanking her armies for all they’d done for her and swearing them a fair wage for those who chose to remain behind as part of the Queen’s Army. Those who wished to turn towards a quiet life, she promised a fair stipend for all their loyalty and sacrifice to her thus far so that they may have what they need to go forth and live the life they choose.

It sounded lovely in theory, but Arya feels her army’s job is far from over. Yes, she’d won Westeros— but so had many others, and that didn’t always last very long for all of them. After the initial speech, Arya had expected and feared that nearly all her men would flee, but thus far a surprisingly few number of them had chosen that path.

_The important thing is that they choose it_, Daenerys had told Arya. _Whatever it may be. They are in control of their own fate, and I will support them in what they choose. It is my duty to reward loyalty wherever I find it. And they have been loyal to me always. If there’s something other than serving me that they desire, they deserve to pursue it before their time on this earth is up and they can pursue things no longer._

Arya didn’t have to be convinced of the value of agency of self, but she still felt it was a bit premature. Then again, perhaps that was her nature (the nature that’d been forced into her through experience). Her nature to feel as if the fight was never fully done, the threat never truly gone _winter is coming, never winter has passed_. In the queen’s eyes, her men had done what they’d sworn to her: they’d helped her take the Seven Kingdoms. In Arya’s eyes, nothing was guaranteed past the moment you had it.
“I’ve also received word from Maester Amos in Storm’s End that there’s been an alarming shift in pressure over the Summer Sea— they’re anticipating the hurricane season will continue on for many months to come, with a few hurricanes potentially maintaining enough intensity to reach north past Massey’s Hook.”

When Arya meets Daenerys’s eyes, she wonders if she, too, is thinking of Gendry. If she is, it’s certainly not with the same roil of her stomach as Arya, the same pounding heart, the same dry-heat to her eyes.

“Dangerous storms?” Arya hears herself ask. She sounds young to her own ears. Her hand sets on the hilt of Needle foolishly, as if she might be able to fight through this danger as she’s fought through every other.

“Send a raven to Lord Gendry assuring him that the crown will support them throughout the season and supply them whatever they may need to weather it. See if we might also get a report from the Conclave on their interpretations of this and what it means for the coming seasons,” Daenerys orders. She waits a moment to see if Ser Davos has anything else, and when it’s clear that he doesn’t, she stands. “I’ll be in the audience chamber within the hour.”

Arya considers following after her, but Ser Davos steps in front of her before she can.

“I asked you not to write to Jon,” he says.

Arya steps around him. “I didn’t listen.”

His glare is steady. “Aye. You didn’t. Now look what’s come of it.”

“My brother’s coming back. I don’t see the problem,” Arya argues. “Jon said things were dealt with in the North.”

“And you believed that? Do you know the queen’s face at all?”

“As well as you,” Arya says, feeling defensive. “Why would Queen Daenerys say everything is fine if it’s not?”

“For plenty of reasons that she’s not required to disclose to us. Something in that letter bothered her. You saw as well as I how long it was— there was more there than ‘I’m coming south, things have been dealt with north’.”

“Perhaps he was detailing his deep love for the queen,” Arya says shortly. “I did the right thing. She wasn’t well.”

“She seems to be getting better.”

“Today. What if tomorrow she’s the same as she’s been? It’s best that Jon’s home.”

Arya was of the strong belief that everything was better when Jon was near. In some ways, he was the only thing in the entire world she still held some spark of childish faith in, some manner of naive infallibility. Maybe that was why she associated him with home.

“It should have been a matter discussed in the council room with the queen and I.”

“I don’t have to discuss anything that I tell my brother with you or the queen. That’s my brother. He was my bloody brother long before he was Westeros’s king.” Arya lifts her teacup up and drains the rest of her mint tea. “I’m going to check on the queen, and I’ll tell her about the letter because I have
nothing to hide. I did the right thing.”

Arya checks a few places before finally finding the queen in the council room alone. She’s at the balcony, Jon’s letter still clutched in her hand, peering out across the rebuilding land. Arya steps behind her.

“I actually heard your footsteps this time,” Daenerys says, her back still to Arya. “A first. You often seem to appear from thin air.”

“I’ve heard that my whole life. Perhaps it’s all this southern food making my footsteps heavier.”

Daenerys doesn’t laugh, and Arya had expected that she would. She is so still, her posture so straight, that she hardly appears to be breathing. It puts Arya on edge.

“Are you angry with me?” Arya asks after a pause.

“For writing to Jon? No. Did you think that I would be?”

“Only if you thought I’d betrayed you. But I did it because I was worried.”

“I know you did. Jon does, too. You were right to be.”

Arya steps forward, coming to stand at Daenerys’ side. She glances briefly at King’s Landing, but then she turns and looks at the queen. She’s startled to see tears on her cheeks. She’s not crying now, but she has been. Now, she’s emotionless, rigid. Somehow, that makes the tears still shining on her cheeks even sadder.

“I—”

Arya’s attempts at saying something are interrupted. Daenerys turns to face Arya, the letter held at her side, her other hand setting on her stomach.

“Tell me, Arya,” she says. Arya turns to face her, too. “Do you believe in evil?”

Arya doesn’t answer straightaway. She thinks of the sound of the Ser Ilyn Payne’s sword slicing the air above her father’s neck, the sight of Robb’s corpse, Grey Wind’s head attached.

“Yes.”

“Do you believe you’d recognize its face if you saw it?”

Arya answers at once this time. “Evil has many faces. I’ve only met a couple of them, but I knew them from the moment I saw them.”

Daenerys is quiet at that. Arya finds herself staring at a teardrop clinging to the queen’s eyelashes, trembling in front of the watery violet of her eyes. When she blinks next, it trembles and falls to her cheek. Arya’s hand twitches at her side as if some part of her had thought of brushing it away.

“Speaking, of course, about pure evil— evil that is incapable of anything but evil acts, devoid of all goodness, evil that is past redemption. Evil that does things no person should ever do to another person. No being to another being.”

Arya’s a bit frightened by the intensity in Daenerys’s voice. She attempts to make her laugh again.

“What’s Jon done to make you this cross with him?”
Her efforts at lightening things fail miserably. The queen’s gaze only grows fiercer.

“How do you believe that sort of evil exists?”

“How can I not?” Arya answers. “After the things I’ve seen. How could you not?”

“That’s what I’ve been asking myself. I thought I had seen every face of evil. I can’t think of a type of pain I haven’t endured at least once in my life. I’ve met so many evil men that their faces blur in my memory. I’m certainly no stranger to violation. And yet, I find myself standing here thinking I’ve been a child all this time, and I’m only now seeing what the world is truly capable of.”

Arya steps closer.

“What’s happened? What did Jon say in his letter?”

Daenerys’s eyes flutter shut. She inhales deeply, visibly conflicted. Arya can feel that this is some sort of defining moment, that whatever Daenerys decides right now will decide a host of other things. At the bare bones of it, though, Daenerys is trying to decide whether or not to trust her completely. Arya doesn’t fault her for the struggle. She had, after all, been North with Sansa, with Bran. She had hoped she had proved herself to Daenerys by now, but perhaps not.

When Daenerys opens her eyes, she meets Arya’s. There’s a depth to her gaze, one that communicates more than Arya can grasp, though she feels something is being asked of her. Don’t betray me, maybe. Don’t let me down. Or perhaps something entirely different.

She holds Jon’s letter out to Arya. Arya takes it after hesitating for a moment. She feels Dany’s eyes on her as she raises it up to read.

_Dany,

Arya wrote to me. I worried that something was not right after your last raven. I should have trusted my gut.

I want, more than anything else, to tell you what I have to tell you in person. Delivering what I have to say this way is unfair, but it would also be unfair for me not to deliver it. I have a long journey home, and despite every effort I am going to make to prevent it, things may get out of my control again, and if that happens, I need you to understand. I need you to recognize it for what it is—I need you to know I am going to take care of it.

Bran has been causing the things you are going through. The fear, the inability to sleep or eat. If he’s done to you what he’s done to me, he’s caused horrific visions at night and excruciating headaches, as well. It’s all been getting progressively worse the entire time I’ve been away, to the point that I truly thought I was going mad. Bran—though he is not truly Bran—kept trying to make me believe that I was, that you were, that we both were, but he was causing it. He can get inside the minds of living beings and manipulate them. He wanted you to suffer, and he wanted the same for me.

I knew something was not right when I read Arya’s letter. The way she described your suffering reminded me entirely of my own, and because of that, I was able to determine what Bran was doing. He admitted to it as such, and if you also felt a sudden wave of relief last night, it is because he was knocked unconscious.

He is with us now. We are keeping him unconsciousness and plan for him to remain that way the entire journey. Once he is here, I plan to find out more about why he said some of the things he said and why he has done what he has to us. And then I plan to execute him.
If you should find yourself feeling the way you have been feeling again, fight it. Fight it with all you have. I do not yet know Bran’s true intentions, but he has admitted to me that he wishes you grievous harm. For that, I will swing the sword myself.

Sansa will bend the knee to us in front of the Northern lords today, or half of our troops that I am leaving behind in Winterfell will arrest her and bring her South. Assuming she pledges fealty, I told her she’ll need to appear South to meet with you and I to discuss the future of Winterfell. For now, the Northern seat has moved to Hornwood.

When I return, I will answer all of your questions. We are going to figure out what to do about this together. I will be there as soon as I possibly can.

I love you, Dany, and I intend to show you how much when I see you again. You are—

Arya stops reading there. She can tell the last couple of paragraphs have little to do with Bran, and she doesn’t want to invade that part of her brother’s life. It sounds like his privacy has been invaded enough already.

She passes the letter back to Daenerys, her mind reeling. She wishes she didn’t believe it, but she had seen the way Daenerys was the month prior: she had known, instinctively, that it was something greater than just ‘madness’. She had even wrote that to Jon she’d felt so sure of it. She just hadn’t imagined it could be something caused by Bran. Something so awful. There were many times in Arya’s life that all she had was her own sense of self to ground her, to make her feel secure. She tries to imagine what it would feel like to have something invading her mind— something making her think nonstop of terrifying things— and she finds she can’t. She thinks, though, that one of the hardest parts must be not knowing where those thoughts come from. Fearing they might come from yourself. Fear cuts deeper than swords, Arya remembers. Harder to fight, too.

“Daenerys,” she says faintly, and then stops, unsure how to go on.

Daenerys walks over towards a wooden bench a couple feet away and sinks down onto it, her hands locking together in her lap atop Jon’s words. She looks back out towards King’s Landing. And still— they say nothing. What is there to say? Arya is overcome with horror, and beneath that, guilt. There’s a generous amount of confusion there, too, but she knows that confusion is something she’ll have to live with until Jon arrives.

“The things that I saw every night…”

Arya had been studying the skyline as she thinks, but she looks back at Daenerys at those words. She appears haunted, and rightfully so.

“They were something different. I knew it. And sometimes, I could feel it— the presence of something else. Sometimes I could push it away, but when I was sleeping…and later, when I was so weak because I couldn’t eat…it would come day and night. The most terrible things, Arya. I don’t think I will ever forget them.”

Arya still doesn’t know what to say, but she walks over and sits beside the queen anyway. She think maybe the best thing she can do now is listen.

“All the terrors that I’ve been through in my life, all the times I’ve been abused, raped, hunted down, betrayed— all I had to get me through it was faith in myself,” she says. She turns to face Arya and Arya meets her gaze. Her eyes are more vulnerable than Arya has ever seen. “It’s all I had. And he nearly took it from me. In its place, he filled me with horrors and fear that I couldn’t control, horror and fear that could have cost me my child. I didn’t believe in myself at all. How could I, when I
couldn’t even get myself to eat despite knowing I had to? How could I, when every night my head was full of things no good-hearted, sane person could ever conceive? My baby, cut from me, dismembered in front of me while I lay there and bled out—”

She stops, her words severing. She appears nauseated. It matches the nausea gripping Arya’s stomach. Her body physically rebels against even that brief image, her heart dropping and stomach churning, but she reminds herself it wasn’t just a brief image for the queen. It was something she had to watch happen every night, every day. Suddenly, Arya’s thinking of the queen’s state the month prior with something closer to respect than pity. How was it she could sit in that audience chamber all day long and hear uncounted tales from people while thoughts like that were tearing through her mind? How was she able to care about the creation of sickhouses, scholarhouses— anything at all?

There is nothing to say. Arya briefly considers apologizing on Bran’s behalf—a duty when one’s blood has wronged another so grievously— but that’s not Bran who did that. Not her blood. It’s whatever thing resides in him. Whatever evil.

Instead of filling the air with empty words, she reaches over into Daenerys’s lap and touches the back of her clasped hands. The queen’s hands unfurl, and Arya takes her left one, holding it between both of her own. The silk of Daenerys’s dress cools the backs of Arya’s hands. When the queen’s free hand goes to her stomach, Arya holds just a bit tighter.

“Now we know what it was,” Arya says. “Now we know where it came from. And now that we know, we can stop it from happening again. We can fight it.”

She notices her own use of we rather than I. She supposes she’s decided this is as much her fight as Daenerys’s.

“How can I fight an enemy that I can’t even see?”

Arya thinks of the Waif. For the first time, thoughts of that time don’t bring back a vivid memory of the desperation, the hopelessness, the anger. The darkness. She’s too busy thinking of the present (and the future).

“You learn to see without seeing. We adapt to the nature of the threat, and we meet it head-on.”

Daenerys finally laughs, but it’s not the sort of laugh Arya had been trying to get earlier in the conversation. It’s short, watery— though, at least, it’s not without affection. “I don’t know what Jon said to you before he left to get you as dedicated to protecting me as you seem to be. Promise me, Arya, that if I ever do something you think is wrong that you will come to me and talk to me. Promise me you won’t ever betray me. Do me that kindness always. I know you’re here for Jon, for your brother, but I’ve grown fond of you.”

Arya wonders if her association with the Starks’ treason will follow her around for the rest of her life like King Aerys’ madness follows Daenerys. It makes her heart ache that the queen should even feel the need to ask this of her, but she understands it. Arya herself is only just re-learning how to trust people again after all she’s been through, and she’s suffered significantly fewer betrayals than Daenerys has. She also has much less to lose.

She’s so out of practice with showing and receiving affection— something she had once been good at— that she fears she won’t be able to give anything at all. But the right words come to her, honestly and easily.

“I promise. And I’m not only here for Jon. At the start I was, but not anymore.”
The queen pulls her hand from Arya’s, and for a second, Arya’s heart drops. She feels vulnerable, young—worried she’s overstepped somehow. But then her brother’s wife moves closer, and when her arm settles over Arya’s shoulders, Arya moves closer, too.

They sit like this, quietly, the moment tender. How long has it been since Arya has felt tenderness like this? Like the kind a mother might give. She can’t remember. She tries to count the years back, like pulling petals from a flower, but can’t bear to deconstruct her thoughts that way—can’t bear to dig that deep into her own past and expose the ugliness, or the beauty (the things she’s been missing…the people she would always miss).

*Love has many faces, too,* she thinks. She sees her father’s wise dark eyes, her mother’s auburn hair, Nymeria’s ears perking up curiously, Robb’s cocky grin, Jon’s proud smile. Gendry’s soft eyes, Hot Pie’s flour-dusted hands, Sansa’s thin wrists, Bran’s—the real Bran’s—smile. She thinks of the warm shape of Daenerys’ stomach beneath her palm, her long silver hair. *How many more faces do I have to meet?*

For the first time, Arya sees a future stretched ahead of her, a sun-brightened field lush with roses. With hope of spring—of home.

III.

They stop to rest at the Inn at the Crossroads.

The last time they’d stopped to make camp had been almost a full day prior, so despite Jon’s reluctance, he has little choice but to cease traveling for the night. His men are nearly delirious with fatigue, and despite Jon’s surety that he himself could press on all for another half-day from here, he knows it’s not right to demand that of his men. They have at least six days of hard-paced travel left yet, and he doesn’t need any of them falling ill.

Most hurry inside the Inn for ale, food, and rest as soon as they tie their horses, but Jon is less hurried. Despite the exhaustion weighing on him, he still feels better now than he felt all last month. He may be sore, and caked in dirt and sweat, and spent, but his head is free of pain, and he hasn’t seen one bad thing in his dreams in nearly three weeks now. That’s good enough for him.

He takes his time making sure the horses are secured properly, not particularly wanting to go into the Inn where he knows his appearance will receive quite a lot of attention. He checks that the cargo is secured after that just to appear busy and unapproachable to the people now crowding the windows and doors of the Inn. Ghost is his constant shadow, and he thinks that’s making the people even more curious. He goes to stand by the wheelhouse Bran is in so it will block him from view, but he doesn’t open it or look inside. He hasn’t looked at Bran once the entire trip. He is certain that the moment he sees him again, that blackout rage will wash over him, and he will kill him.

“You can’t kill him yet,” Tyrion tells Jon nightly. “Yes, of course, we need answers, but more importantly than that, you cannot deny the queen her right for justice. She has been wronged, too, in a way she is going to take strong offense to.”

It’s a good point, one Jon concedes to. He knows he would have been furious if the tables were turned and Daenerys killed Bran before he could even speak to him and find out why he’d done the things he had. But it’s difficult not to give into the hatred he feels at times, the darkness that furls at the pit of his stomach.

When his hunger finally pressures him into going into the Inn, he’s surprised by the depth of love he receives from the travelers. The Innkeeper loads his table with more dishes than Jon can count, and he’s surrounded by people who seem to have a million questions for him. He talks with them while
he eats, gradually growing warm from the ale Tyrion keeps pouring and the positive things he hears about the impressive progress being made in King’s Landing. Daenerys, it seems, has been as busy as ever. Jon feels as if his chest could burst open with pride as he hears the travelers speak of her. She’s loved by her people, but by no one more than him.

It just serves to renew his impatience to get back home. He retires early because of it, knowing the sooner he goes to sleep, the sooner it will be time to get back on the road. He washes himself best he can, stripes down to his small clothes, and sits at the end of the thin mattress with Ghost. The fire in the hearth is feeble, but it’s soothing: the warmth and the noise of the popping logs lulls him to a peaceful state, one that he’s content to sit and think in. He stares at the flames so long his vision blurs, his mind on a fire of a different kind. He’s thinking of Dany, of the rose-sweet softness of her hair, of what she might look like when he sees her again in less than a week’s time, of the fire of her touch— he gets so swept up in thoughts of those kind that he hardly notices the textures and shapes forming in the flames, hardly processes them. Even when he does, it’s with no particular thrill of alarm or fear. He looks upon them with as much peace as he’d felt moments prior, as if he’d been waiting for the images in the flames all this time. His eyes sink towards the shapes in the fire, falling into the depth of them, and he feels heat near his skin. Hot, searing. Like he’s standing so close to the hearth he’s nearly in the flames, but he isn’t. He’s still on the bed.

But he’s not. He turns on the spot in the sea-tossed corridor beneath the deck, struggling not to fall to the wooden floorboards as furious waves pound the ship back and forth. Thunder rumbles in a continuous growl above, and the wind sounds like he’s flying at some great speed. He falls to the floorboards as the boat lurches starboard side, landing in something wet.

He hears a growing roar that’s separate from the wind, a crackling that’s separate from the thunder. Heat kisses the back of his neck, his shoulders— he can feel the slick boards beneath him growing hot quickly. When he turns to glance behind him, he gasps: fire is spreading towards him, licking the corridor walls. It’s devoured half the deck above, and Jon, sliding away from the flames, unable to stand for how hard the boat is rocking, catches glimpses of the night sky each time lightning illuminates it: fierce, purpleblack clouds, a black sea towering towards the stars, powerful black wings cutting through the wall of rain—

Light blinds Jon for a dazzling moment. And then the entire deck above is up in flames.

He drags himself down the corridor, using the spaces between the floorboards as purchase. His mouth tastes salty from the seawater crashing into the ship, and smoke bears down on him, choking him, and then he hears— the noise somehow hovering above everything else— a cry of pain that floods him with panic—

“Your Grace?”

Tyrion Lannister’s voice pulls Jon’s sight from the fire. He blinks at the return of the room at the Inn, his body as relaxed as it’d been at the start. He rises to his feet and steps to the door.

“What?” he asks gruffly.

Tyrion’s holding three books. “Are you preoccupied at the moment?”

Jon looks back to the fireplace. He shakes his head. “No. Come in.”

He steps back, allowing Tyrion in. Tyrion walks over to the rickety table in front of the fire and dumps the three volumes atop it; Jon watches it sway beneath the weight, thinking suddenly to the way he’d been thrown from side to side in that corridor. But any panic he may have felt while seeing that is gone, leaving in its place a peculiar pleasantness.
“Where’s Bran right now?” he asks Tyrion. His mind is telling him to panic, but he can’t seem to get himself to feel upset. What had just happened felt very different from what Bran had been doing. It hadn’t felt like being taken over at all—it had felt, rather, like being handed something.

“Bran is where he’s been the past three weeks: unconscious in the wheelhouse. He was tended to for a couple minutes after waking and then given another dose of milk of the poppy a half-hour ago. He’s hardly breathing currently.”

Jon sits heavily on the end of the bed. Tyrion wordlessly opens a book and begins reading as if he’s in his own chambers. That distracts Jon from his thoughts.

“Was there a reason you came here?” he asks.

Tyrion turns the book around. Jon stares at a page of dark symbols. “I don’t suppose you know how to read runes?”

“Not in the slightest.” Nor did he particularly care about them.

Tyrion sighs. “Well, that is very unfortunate, Jon. I had hoped you could.”

“Sorry to disappoint you,” Jon says dryly. He turns back to the flames, and Tyrion to another book he’d brought. He half-listens to Tyrion’s rambling.

“The Faith of the Seven boasts seven religious texts—an apt number, granted—while the faith of the Lord of Light boasts 33. An interesting number—33. Of course, there are texts that are more important than others, but all are considered mandatory for one seeking to understand the complexities of the faith. Are you familiar with the Red God, Jon?”

“No. Can’t say I’ve ever met him.”

“Apart from him bringing you back to life, you mean.”

Jon feels uneasiness creep up on him for the first time. He looks at Tyrion. “We can’t know that. Just because she believed that doesn’t mean it’s true.”

After his mention of the Red Woman, he looks back at the flames. He thinks of the way she’d seemed every time he’d witnessed her staring at them. Calm. Relaxed. Focused.

He shifts uneasily.

Tyrion inclines his head thoughtfully. “It’s the irony of religion: if it’s true, it’s really the only thing we ought to be troubling ourselves with, but there is little purpose troubling ourselves with it when there’s no way to prove it’s true.”

“Did you come to get my insight on your philosophical ramblings?”

“You’re in a mood,” Tyrion comments. Jon gives him a hard look. “…Your Grace. And no, actually. Red Fly has consumed a bit too much ale and is sleeping it off.”

“And I’m standing in for Red Fly? This is what you make him endure?”

“Of course not, Your Grace…Red Fly is a much better thinking partner.”

“Somehow, I think I’ll be able to live with that just fine.”

Tyrion turns back to his tome and Jon to the flames. Tyrion proceeds to talk nonstop.
“Of all 33, the most interesting is the Book of Prophecies. Every vision ever reported by a Red Priestess is recorded within it pages. It resides in Volantis, however, and no ordinary person is permitted to set their eyes upon it. I imagine it’s full of terrible things. The Great Other in the faith of the Lord of Light— their force of evil, their God of Night and Terror— is so feared it’s forbidden to even utter his name. He is matched in strength with the Lord of Light. They say what the Lord of Light does with light, for light, the Great Other does with darkness, for darkness. The night is dark and full of terrors, indeed.”

The word falls numbly from Jon’s mouth: “Indeed.”

His nights had been, anyway. They had been the darkest and most terrible things he’d ever known.

“Of course, we should expect nothing less from a religion that believes we’re currently living in hell, and the only way to be free from it is to die, ideally by fire, to join the Lord of Light. I’ve met with several Red Priestesses over the years and I can attest to the fact that they are the gloomy type, which I suppose is a suitable demeanor if you think you’re in hell. The first Red Priestess I interacted with was preaching that the Lord of Light had sent us the Dragon Queen.”

Jon turns and looks at Tyrion at the mention of his wife, paying close attention now.

“The second was a High Priestess in Volantis. She was exceptionally unmoved….though she did proclaim Queen Daenerys to be the one who was promised, fire reborn, sent to remake the world. And not too long after that, your favorite Red Priestess, Melisandre, visited us on Dragonstone. She was insistent about two things: that you and the queen must meet, and that you both would play a part in some prophecy of the prince or princess who was promised.”

It’s not the first time he’s heard that phrase. It was one of the first things he’d heard upon returning from the grave. Stannis was not the prince who was promised, but someone must be. Him, she had meant, Ser Davos told him after the fact.

“She told Ser Davos that I was the ‘prince who was promised’ after I was resurrected,” Jon provides.

“Yes,” Tyrion agrees. He looks away from the book completely now and meets Jon’s eyes. “He and I have spoken of it once before. Many Red Priestesses believe the one who was promised will be a Targaryen, which fits both you and the Queen, of course, but they also say the one who was promised will be ‘born amidst salt and smoke.’ That bit seems to favor Queen Daenerys: she was born on Dragonstone.”

Jon’s gruff. “I don’t believe in prophecies.”

“A peculiar thing to say considering you were brought back to life and have sired a child with a previously-barren woman who walked into the flames and came out unharmed with three living dragons.”

“I never said I didn’t believe in magic. I just don’t believe in prophecies. If the Gods wanted us to know something, they’d tell us exactly what they want us to know. They wouldn’t send various priestesses mismatched snippets of visions in the flames.” Jon looks back at the fireplace, his stomach clenching. “I don’t know where the things people see come from, but even if parts of them are real, there’s no way to know the full story of anything. Prophecies cause more trouble than they’re worth. Look at all Melisandre did because of them. She burned an innocent little girl alive.”

“Sometimes prophecies are true,” Tyrion points out.
“And sometimes they’re shit,” Jon shoots back.

Tyrion observes him carefully. He sets his arm down on his opened book, holding his place. “You really don’t like the idea of her being ‘the princess who was promised’, do you?”

There’s no use lying.

“Aye. No. I don’t. I think, for the rest of her life, Queen Daenerys should get to choose who she is and what her destiny is. After all she’s lost and all she’s done, don’t you think she’s afforded some rest?”

“You’re speaking now as the father of her child, I see.”

“And as her husband, and as her family,” Jon says, unashamed. “I don’t hide that fact.”

“And if she is destined for something larger than simply ruling the Seven Kingdoms and restoring House Targaryen?” Tyrion asks.

“Then she’ll find that for herself. I’m not interested in visions in the flames.”

Especially not seeing them myself, he thinks. If that’s even what he’d seen. As far as he knows, seeing visions in the flames is something the followers of the Lord of Light spend years trying to achieve; he can’t understand why he, without even maintaining faith in the Red God, would be able to see anything.

Then again, he hadn’t understood why or how he could’ve returned from the dead, either. And that had happened.

“Forgive me, Your Grace, but I think we should be interested in anything we can discover, considering what we’re up against.”

“I doubt the one who was promised has anything to do with Bran,” Jon says. “I was always under the impression it had to do with destroying the Night King. And Arya killed him. So even if the prophecy was legitimate, it matters little now.”

Tyrion looks unconvinced. He fiddles almost nervously with the fraying end of the cloth-bound cover to the book.

“Prophecies are dangerous things,” he quotes. “That’s what Melisandre told Queen Daenerys and I. She believed it referred to the Night King and his armies, but she also believed it referred to Stannis. If she got the initial identity of the savior wrong, perhaps she got the initial identity of the threat wrong.”

Jon is unimpressed. Tyrion turns back to the book with a sigh.

“I just think it’s worth looking into,” he mutters.

“And if you want to look into it in your spare time, fine. But you need not trouble the queen with theories and conjecture. Now, if you could leave…”

Tyrion closes his books, but he hesitates on the edge of his seat, words perched at the end of his tongue. Jon waits impatiently, but Tyrion presses his lips back together and stands, clearly deciding not to share whatever he’d been thinking about.

“Sleep well, Your Grace,” he says.
Once he’s gone, Jon climbs beneath the covers of the hard, cold bed and falls easily into a deep, unperturbed sleep, the peace the flames wrought still present both in mind and body.

IV.

He reluctantly agrees to stop about a day from King’s Landing, if only so the horses can rest and he can bathe. He takes to a small stream with a few other men and scrubs his skin with a handful of gritty sand, working the grime and sweat of the month-long journey from him. He unites his hair after that— it’s so coarse and oily from being unwashed that he struggles to get the tie entirely free— and then he dunks his head beneath the water and scrubs viciously at his scalp. One of the Dothraki men made a crude hair soap using hot white ashes from a hardwood fire, cooking oil, and a handful of mint leaves, and Jon finds it surprisingly effective as he massages the soft flakes into his hair.

He feels lighter after he dries himself off. He sits wrapped in a towel as his washed clothing hangs near the fire to dry, Red Fly and Blue Rat conversing a few steps away. It’s certainly not his most regal look— sat naked except for a towel, his hair dripping down his shoulders and back, his scars beholden to the sun— but they’re so far off the road that he doubts anyone would stumble upon them.

“Feel better?”

Jon glances back at Tyrion as he approaches. He’s carrying a small looking glass, and when he reaches Jon, Jon sees he also has a razor and shears. It’s precisely that moment that Jon realizes he hasn’t looked at himself in weeks, months— he’s unsure. He’s aware of the length of his hair and beard, but it’s not until Tyrion hands him the looking glass that he’s aware of just how wild he looks. It’s no wonder the travelers had treated him like a long-lost friend— he could’ve easily been any other wayward traveler in that Inn.

“The queen can thank me later,” Tyrion says, forcing the shears and razor Jon’s way.

He accepts them. Now that he’s seen his appearance, he can’t very well return home this way. He rises and walks a few feet towards where his clothes are drying, reaching into the pan sat near it for more of the Dothraki hair soap. Once he’s returned to his previous place, he sets about trimming his beard, and Tyrion holds the looking glass for him.

“I should think you of all people would want the queen to take offense to my appearance,” Jon comments.

“No,” Tyrion refutes. “Perhaps at one time— definitely at one time, but not now. It would be a losing battle besides.”

Jon has to fight a smile back as he continues tidying up his beard, his thoughts on the way Daenerys’s eyes soften when she looks at him, the way she makes him believe he’s something worth loving, the way she makes him feel like a king. He knows it matters little to her what he looks like.

They sit together, Jon thinking of Dany, Tyrion watching the stream. Jon trims his hair as best he can, cutting the months’ worth of length from the end of each section of curls. He’s a bit surprised by how long Tyrion’s been quiet— it’s almost nice, just sitting here listening to the stream and distant conversations.

Of course, it doesn’t last long.

“I was here once,” Tyrion says. His words are heavy. “With Jaime. At this very stream here.”

Jon moves his eyes from his reflection. Tyrion appears wistful, as if the memory he’s thinking of is a
good one. Some rare moment of happiness in childhood, Jon guesses.

“I’m sorry,” Jon tells him. He truly is. “It’s hard to lose brothers. I know.”

Three now he’d lost. Robb to the Freys, Rickon to the Boltons, Bran to…Jon’s not sure. Something evil.

Tyrion meets Jon’s eyes, tearing his from the river.

“Oh, I haven’t lost anything,” he tells Jon matter-of-factly. Jon can’t feel anything but pity in response. “Jaime will come back. I imagine he’s biding his time, waiting to see whether or not our queen is the forgiving type.”

Jon is as gentle as he can be. “Sansa said Ser Jaime and Ser Brienne left Winterfell after the battle, headed for King’s Landing just as we were.”

Tyrion still appears little more than wistful for his childhood days. There’s no pain to indicate he understands what Jon is saying. And Tyrion is the cleverest person Jon knows, so his ignorance can’t be anything but denial.

“Our builders have begun clean-up at the Red Keep. They found Cersei’s remains,” he reminds Jon. “If Jaime had gone back to King’s Landing, he would’ve gone back to Cersei, and he wasn’t there.”

Jon starts to remind Tyrion of the absolute destruction of some areas of the Red Keep. He starts to remind him that Jaime could have been blown to pieces by Wildfire on his way to the Red Keep, like so many others had. But he stops short. What would anyone gain from those words? Tyrion being in pain wouldn’t bring Jaime back. If he wanted to imagine that Jaime was out there somewhere with Ser Brienne, then so be it. It wasn’t that different, really, from people of faith believing their loved ones were somewhere above, somewhere better. He would have liked to have believe that, too.

“Losing sisters is hard, too,” Tyrion says. He lowers the looking glass he’d been holding as Jon finishes cutting the last section of his hair. “Oh, I hated my sister more than I’ve ever hated anything in this world, make no mistake. Yet she was my sister. I was glad for the world when she died, but I’ll admit a strange sadness fell over me for a few days. I think, perhaps, it was mourning the loss of House Lannister more than Cersei herself.”

Jon thinks to his own house—one of them. Bran gone in heart and soul and soon to be in body. All that remains of it is Arya, Sansa, and himself, and of those three, none will carry on the line. His sisters, should they choose to marry and bear children, will give sons to other houses. His own child will be of House Targaryen in name and title.

“House Stark has likely seen the last of its days, as well.”

Tyrion laughs suddenly. He shakes his head as it panders off. “Who would have guessed ten years ago that of those three houses it would be House Targaryen living on, at least for one generation longer than the others? And if Daenerys has a boy…well, House Targaryen might outlive them all.”

“She thinks it’s a girl,” Jon tells Tyrion. His heart swells with affection: he’s begun to imagine his child whenever he thinks or speaks of her. Silver-pale curls and chubby fists. Grey eyes dark as smoke. “I hope it is.”

Tyrion’s visibly surprised. “Then you’re the only king in the world who ever wished it.”

“Perhaps I am,” Jon says. “Yet I can’t help but think the women outstay us. She’d have better odds of survival a woman.”
Tyrion makes a sound of blatant disagreement. “Historically and factually, no. And a Targaryen woman, at that? Certainly not. It would, undoubtedly, be better for the child to be male.”

Jon doesn’t mean to react as intensely as he does, but those words bring back what Bran had said to him, and with it, pure, burning hatred.

“Young queen is a Targaryen woman,” he snaps. “The queen you chose.”

“Yes, she is. And look at the things she went through to get here. A hell of a lot more than you did, if you don’t mind me saying, Your Grace. Can you imagine how much easier her journey to the Iron Throne would have been if she were male?”

“The world won’t be like that any longer by the time my child is grown. Dany and I won’t let it be like that.”

“I shall check in with you both on that vow in two decades,” Tyrion mutters, skeptical. His eyes follow Ghost as he steps from the tree line. Jon holds his hand out, and Ghost comes over, walking right underneath it so that Jon is resting his hand in his thick fur. “Your direwolf could use a bath, as well.”

Jon turns to look at Ghost. Ghost looks back at him, his muzzle stained with blood from his most recent hunt. Jon smiles as he strokes his fur.

“Ghost is no pet,” he tells Tyrion. “If he wants to be clean, he’ll go for a swim.”

“And what will you do with Ghost when we return?” Tyrion questions. “King’s Landing is hardly the place for a direwolf.”

“Ghost’s place is with me,” Jon corrects. “If it wasn’t, he wouldn’t have come back to find me, and he wouldn’t still be with me now.”

*There’s no chance I’m sending Ghost away again. Not now. Not with the baby— not with this danger. Jon is stronger with Ghost. Of that, he is certain. And he needs to be stronger than ever for what is to come.*

## V.

Their walk into King’s Landing feels like a parade.

People line both sides of the repaired streets, chattering and cheering, indifferent to the exhaustion of the traveling party. The Targaryen banners flying from their staffs are more animated in the slight breeze than any of the men carrying them, but that does little to deter the people’s enthusiasm.

Despite his exhaustion, Jon is overcome with shock as he studies the progress that’s been made in King’s Landing since he left. Pride comes soon after. He passes by rows of newly-constructed houses that outnumber the destroyed ones ten to one. He passes by a completed sept, brimming with clean worshipers hanging out of the windows waving, and a building he realizes must be one of the newly established sickhouses. A number of both healers and maesters stand at the doorway, beaming. When Jon passes by one of Dany’s scholarhouses, adults and children come running out into the streets, waving and beaming. Jon can’t help but stop to speak with them, asking a little Flea Bottom boy about a book in his hand, and he tells Jon, matter-of-factly, that he’s learning to read. Even the burn scars on his hands seem fainter than they must’ve been three months ago.

It isn’t long until Jon feels like King Jon. Whatever respectability he felt he’d lost over the past couple of months is restored to him by the way the commonfolk call out to him, smile at him, reach
for him. It takes him aback: he hadn’t expected that he would be missed. This rebirth, he feels, is entirely of Dany’s labor, but the people seem to remember the weeks he’d walked amongst them at Dany’s side.

And it’s nice to be missed, but he’s too busy missing Dany to appreciate it much. With every step towards the Maidenvault, Jon’s heart grows just a bit tighter in his chest with excitement, his stomach just a bit heavier with anticipation. He hasn’t set eyes on Daenerys in nearly three months. He hasn’t touched her in nearly three months. He hasn’t felt genuine happiness in nearly three months. As he imagines seeing her again, he is filled with such longing that he can’t tell precisely what he wants. Everything, maybe. To make love to her, to talk to her about all the things they’d been through until they’re so tired they can’t utter another world. To hold her in his arms and slip into dreams (pleasant ones). To set his hands on her stomach— her stomach that must be large now after all this time—and feel the shape of life beneath them. To touch her soft hair, to breathe in the rose-sweet scent of it, to kiss her throat. And then to make love to her all over again.

There’s a common thread in his thoughts, he knows. It’s crafted of a particular type of hunger, one he’s only ever felt for Dany. One that is beyond physical—but physical, too. That fire he had felt so keenly on their wedding night, a fire that rages and consumes, that calls for him to kiss her soft and love her hard and often, to embrace both sides of the coin.

As they draw nearer to the Maidenvault’s courtyard, he sees the most welcome sight in the world: his family. From this distance, he can’t make out much more than Arya’s silhouette and Dany’s hair shining pale beneath the sun, but that’s enough. Above them, Drogon flies in what appears to be excited circles, loudly rumbling in a way Jon has only ever heard him rumble for Daenerys. Jon feels his heart could burst right through the jagged scar on his chest.

He tightens his fist in Ghost’s fur. “Come on, boy,” he says, and Ghost picks up his pace at once, out-striding Jon quickly. Ghost’s pace increases gradually until he’s bolting across the courtyard, weaving through the soldiers grouped around and watching Jon’s arrival. Jon feels the wind rushing past Ghost as if it were him running, and in some ways, it is.

He’s close enough now to make out Daenerys’s expression as Ghost reaches her, though Ghost is blocking most of her— he’s half as tall as her. She had been staring in Jon’s direction, her gaze steady as the sun, but she leans over as Ghost presses against her, her hands disappearing into his fur. Ghost looks up at her as she massages his sides, blood-stained muzzle stretched in what reminds Jon of a wolfish grin, his tongue lolling out in a most undignified manner.

“You’re sure he’s not a pet?” Tyrion asks, stepping up beside him. “He’s got every appearance of a tavern dog right now.”

“I’m sure,” Jon says firmly, watching from afar as Ghost rests his face gently on the swell of Dany’s stomach. He looks up at her with his red eyes, tail swaying softly. Arya steps over and pats his back affectionately, seemingly pleased with his reaction to Dany. And as Jon finally reaches them, he can tell that Dany is, too. Her violet eyes are dancing, her cheeks flushed, her face graced with a soft smile. Jon can’t help the way his heart is pounding, the way his stomach has tightened, the way his skin seems to buzz. There is no reprieve: when Dany makes to step closer, Ghost moves to the side to clear her path, enabling Jon to see her unblocked for the first time, and he feels as if she’s just crumbled his lungs up between her pretty hands. The breath goes from him— shamelessly, completely. He stops where he is, his eyes drawn immediately to her stomach, round and full beneath the violet silk of her dress. She stops a few steps in front of him, her hands setting gently atop her stomach, and Jon feels as if his throat is stitching closed. His eyes burn with heat. And his skin, too.

His eyes seek hers. He sweeps his gaze over her face, wondering if she’s somehow become even
more beautiful in his absence or if he’s just never fully appreciated it before. Perhaps both. He feels he could look at her forever and never tire of it.

He knows they’re in public. He knows they have a duty to be modest, to be regal, to be sensible. But there is nothing modest about the way he loves her, and right then, nothing sensible, either. He steps forward until his body is pressed against the front of hers, his hands reaching up to take her face softly. He notices now that her hair is completely up—twisted and set in a crown of intertwined braids—and his eyes dance down the lovely length of her exposed neck, over her bare shoulders. When he meets her eyes again, her hands rise to set over his own. He sweeps her cheeks with his thumbs, his breaths trembling, his heart still pounding hard. She’s looking at him with so much love—it causes a crescendo inside his chest, and before he thinks a thing about it, he’s got his lips pressed to hers. *Just one kiss,* he tells himself, one hand sliding down to the back her bared neck. *Just one, and then the fire will die down.*

But it doesn’t. Her lips move with his, and between them, he can feel the physical evidence of his absence. He can’t understand why, and he doesn’t bother to even try, but the shape of her stomach rouses something primal in him, some sort of satisfaction that makes him crave her all the more. His fingers brush the tie of her dress, nothing more than a simple knot at the back of her neck, and forcing his fingers not to pull at it is torturous. He thinks of nothing but her—the softness of her full lips, the taste of her mouth, the pleasure every touch from her sends cascading down his spine. He thinks nothing in the world could tear him away from her—he thinks he’s going to have to walk her backwards toward the Maidenvault and have her right inside the door—but something *could* take her from him. The thought hits him like a strike, and when he pulls his lips from Dany’s, it’s with reluctance so great it’s sorrow.

She looks up at him, as out of breath as he is, her eyes filling with something akin to fear—some type of vulnerability. He swallows hard against his racing heart, resisting the overwhelming desire to drop his lips to the skin visible through the circular cut-out in the fabric of her dress (to kiss the skin exposed there, the skin between her breasts).

He shouldn’t have let himself get swept away here, in front of their soldiers and what exists of their small council, but he can’t let her think he doesn’t want her, either. Especially not when he feels he might burst into flames from the heat of that want. He caresses her face again, his eyes burning into hers, and he leans in and kisses her again—slowly, softly, doing his best to pour all his want and love into it. When he pulls back again, she looks less concerned.

“Bran,” he explains to her quietly. “I need to make sure he gets where he needs to be, that all the guards here understand what needs to be done with him.”

Her eyebrows lower slightly at the mention of Bran. She has one hand on the back of his neck, and when she strokes her thumb against his skin, he has to resist the urge to shudder. He nearly takes her in his arms again right then.

“All right. We’ll go together,” she decides.

He smiles. Before he can step away from her, he has to lean in and kiss her one more time, his arms tugging her body flush against his as best he can. He rests his forehead against hers after reluctantly tearing his lips away, and for a few moments, he simply hugs her to him. She holds him just as tightly. His face presses against her hair briefly; he feels almost dizzy with affection at the smell of her, and it’s all too much all at once. He steps back, putting distance between them, certain his willpower will disappear entirely if he spent one more moment touching her. How had he survived the distance?

He turns to Red Fly and asks him to bring Bran to what remains of the Red Keep dungeons,
informing him that he and Daenerys will be there to meet with the guards shortly. Grey Worm goes with Red Fly, the two talking rapidly together in Valyrian. Jon’s thoughts are further grounded by Arya’s voice.

“That was, without a doubt, the worst thing I’ve ever seen, and I’ve seen a great deal.”

Jon turns towards Arya’s voice. Despite the disgust in her tone, she’s smiling, and Jon can’t help but laugh as she throws her arms around his shoulders. He hugs her, lifting her up off her feet as he does, and her laughter joins his. Jon sees Dany smiling from over Arya’s shoulder, her hand settling on Ghost’s back as he sidles up beside her once more, and he’s hit at once by overwhelming gratitude for more things than he can name. Dany’s glowing health— his little sister— the letter she’d sent to him that had helped him figure out what Bran was doing (which had saved his life, he’s certain). He drops a kiss to the top of Arya’s head, squeezing her tighter.

“Your letter saved us, Arya,” he tells her quietly. “Thank you.”

He sets her back on her feet. She smiles up at him, and it’s then that he notices how happy she looks. She’s world’s away from the lost girl she’d been when he’d left King’s Landing.

“It was my job,” she tells him. “And I do my job well.”

“Aye,” Jon agrees softly. He fears he might cry for a moment, but before he can give into the intensity of his relief, Drogon swoops down low overhead, causing quite a few soldiers standing nearby to duck in alarm.

“Oh, no, not here…” Dany groans.

Jon sees the problem at once: there’s truly no space in the packed courtyard for Drogon to land, but both he and Dany can tell he’s going to anyway. He dives towards the ground; the people in the way throw themselves to the side just in time for him to land. Daenerys sets towards him at once, affectionately exasperated.

“Drogon, we’ve talked about this,” Jon hears her murmur to him. He grins. She steps beside Drogon and strokes his neck, not even blinking as he leans down to sniff her stomach. Jon can tell this has become customary. He rumbles, content with the safety of the child, and then turns to look at Jon. He’s fond of you, Dany had told Jon once, and he hadn’t quite believed her. But he thinks he can see softness in Drogon’s fiery eyes now, some sort of intelligent affection. Jon steps up to him and reaches out, settling his hand against the rough scales on the side of Drogon’s face. Drogon breathes hard though his nose, sending a gust of humid air barreling into Jon, and then he leans in and gently noses Jon’s hair with a gentleness a beast that large shouldn’t be able to possess. It’s as affectionate as any pet could be, but there is no one on the planet who would mistake Drogon as the pet. I’m the pet, Jon can’t help but think, and that thought makes him laugh again.

Daenerys glances behind Jon where Arya is still standing, a good distance away.

“Arya,” she calls, beaming.

Jon turns to look at his little sister. She’s watching them, a tangle of hesitation and anticipation on her face. Jon remembers, suddenly, the times she’d run around Winterfell with her arms outstretched, proclaiming to anyone who cared to ask that she was Visenya atop Vhagar, headed toward battle, with as much confidence a girl of five years could wield.

Now, she’s Arya Stark, headed towards the last living dragon alive. She holds herself with similar strength.
Jon still remembers the breathless fear and wonder he’d felt the first time he’d approached Drogon. He’s as beautiful and precious as a child in Dany’s eyes— undeniably so— but Jon knows he is intimidating to everyone else.

But his sister is brave. She always has been. She walks slowly towards them, shoulders back, eyes bright with excitement. Daenerys murmurs something Jon can’t hear to Drogon, setting a firm hand on his scales. Jon backs up so he’s standing on the other side of Drogon’s neck, watching as Arya makes her approach.

“How close do I get?” Arya asks them, slowing.

“As close as you like,” Dany answers. “He won’t hurt you.”

Arya stops. “You’re sure?”

“Yes.”

It’s a bit surprising to watch Arya continue forward at those words. When Jon had left, she was still on the fence about trusting Daenerys. And here she was walking straight at Drogon’s face, simply because Daenerys promised he wouldn’t harm her.

Arya moves forward, slows, moves forward again, stops. Both Jon and Dany are patient, and so is Drogon. He’s content to watch Arya with something akin to curiosity as Dany strokes his scales and murmurs softly to him.

Finally, right as Jon spots Grey Worm and Red Fly returning, Arya reaches Drogon. She freezes as he moves his face towards her. He stares at her as if he’s checking for something, posture suddenly rigid, and Jon begins to get a bit nervous. But Drogon’s body relaxes seconds later, and he lowers his head closer to Arya. And Arya, with the brightest giggle Jon has ever heard her give, sets her bare hand against his scales.

It doesn’t take her enthusiasm long to burst from her. She shifts closer, her other hand rising to stroke Drogon as well, and Jon hears her talking to him quietly, though he’s not sure what she’s saying. He looks over at Daenerys, and if she still had any doubts about Arya before, they’re clearly gone now. She’s glowing with happiness.

Jon feels it’s a well-deserved moment of joy for Arya, one he’s not keen to have interrupted. But Grey Worm tells them Bran is in the dungeons and the Maester has arrived, and Jon knows the sooner they deal with this, the better.

He wants to take Dany’s hand the entire walk to the dungeons, but he knows if he touches her he may have to kiss her, and they don’t have time to stop and kiss every ten steps. He walks with Arya between them, trying his best not to look over at Dany as frequently as he catches himself trying to. He feels her eyes on him just as often.

They journey down into the ash-filled, crumbled remains of the dungeons, walking towards the few cells still standing. Bran’s lying flat on his back on a cot, still unconscious, pale as death. For a moment, Jon sees Bran again. Arya’s breath catches.

“It’s not Bran,” he reminds them both.

He hasn’t yet told Dany or Arya the true extent of what Bran— the Three-Eyed Raven— had said and done. They don’t know the disturbing things he’d forced into Jon’s mind every day, the ideas he’d tried to plant, the things he’d wanted Jon to do to Dany. The things he’d said. Targaryen men have always known. Jon can’t help but clench his fists now at the thought of it, and Dany doesn’t
miss it. She steps to his side, standing close enough that their arms are touching, and she surveys Bran quietly. It occurs to Jon as he looks down at his wife that he doesn’t know the extent of what Bran did to her, either. He doesn’t know the things he’d planted in her head, the things he’d tried to get her to do. Perhaps Dany knows a side of Bran’s treachery that’s even worse than Jon’s.

Arya and Dany listen silently as Jon explains nearly the full story to the Maester. He doesn’t tell him the specifics of what Bran said or did, but he tells him about his abilities, tells him he’s plotting against the queen, and requests that Bran be kept unconscious by any means necessary. The Maester suggests some various herbs that may work, and Jon tells him again to do whatever he must.

“How has he been eating? Drinking?” Dany asks suddenly. The question bolts through Jon. He turns to look at her incredulously.

“You’re worried about him being hungry?” Jon demands. He can’t help it. “I don’t give a damn if he’s hungry after what he’s done to us. He’s allowed to wake for a few minutes each day, and he’s offered food and water, and he’s lucky he gets that opportunity. He’s lucky I didn’t cut his throat that night.”

Daenerys absorbs that information, her eyes cast on Bran as she listens. Jon realizes after a time that her gaze isn’t one of concern—it’s cold.

“You misunderstand,” she says coolly, not taking her eyes off Bran once. “I’m wondering whether you’ve considered that he might try to go into the mind of something else when he wakes. If he does — does it matter if we sedate him? Will he be locked in his body—or will he be somewhere else?”

“I know what it feels like when he’s in my head. He hasn’t tried once the entire journey.”

“But what if he’s tried to get into something else? A raven, anything. Would his mind stay in that creature if you sedated him while it’s in it?”

Jon has no idea what to say back to that because he hasn’t considered it. When he’d knocked Bran unconscious, that seemed to stop whatever was happening to him. And if Bran wasn’t able to think, surely he couldn’t actively project his mind elsewhere indefinitely. But Jon doesn’t know: he can’t be certain of anything. He doesn’t understand any of it. And, like Tyrion had said, that’s the real heart of the problem.

“So let’s kill him now and be done with it,” Arya says suddenly, her voice detached. Jon and Dany look over at her. She’s already unsheathing Needle. “A clean death is kinder than this, anyway.”

“No,” Daenerys and Jon chorus, but their reasons are different.

“We need to interrogate him and find out why he did what he did,” Jon says.

“We don’t know what will happen when he dies,” Daenerys adds. “Death isn’t always an end. Sometimes, death is release.”

Jon meets Dany’s eyes, a chill washing over him at those words. He hadn’t thought of that, either. She stares back, frowning, her hand moving to her stomach. He steps closer to her and reaches out, taking the hand she’d set on her stomach. He holds it in his.

“We’ll interrogate him. We’ll do what we have to do to get answers. And as soon as it’s safe to, I’m swinging the sword here,” he says.

“Shall I wake him now, Your Grace?” the Maester asks.
Dany tightens her fingers around Jon’s. She pulls their joined hands back down to her stomach, letting Jon’s knuckles rest there, and he can’t seem to look away from the violet of her eyes. Understanding flows through them—a pleasant thrill. The same he’d felt that night on the boat when she’d opened the door to her chambers and met his eyes.

“No,” they chorus again, but this time it’s softer.

“We will do it tomorrow,” Daenerys decides. “Not today.”

“Shall I let him rouse to take water or keep him sedated until then?”

“Sedated. We’ll offer him water tomorrow when we talk with him,” she answers.

Jon reaches his free hand up and sets it against his wife’s face, stroking her cheek. He addresses the Maester with his eyes never leaving Dany’s and his heart teeming with love.

“He’s to stay unconscious all night. No matter what.”

“Yes, Your Grace.”

Jon glances back when he and Daenerys turn to leave. Arya hasn’t moved.

“Arya?” Daenerys asks, noticing as well.

“I’m going to stay here and make sure he doesn’t wake,” Arya tells them.

“No, I’d rather you didn’t,” Daenerys says. Her concern is evident. “Grey Worm will have guards stationed all night. Come back to the Maidenvault.”

“Is that an order or a request, Your Grace?”

Daenerys hardly pauses. “You know as well as I that it’s a request—a plea. Please, Arya. I won’t be able to sleep knowing you’re in here with him. You know the things he’s capable of. I don’t want you in here.”

She looks at Jon, appealing for his support. It’s easily given.

“Daenerys is right,” Jon says. “You don’t need to be here.”

Arya can’t seem to walk away. “He’s my brother. Someone who loved him should be here to witness his last days. Someone should be here.”

“It’s his body. But it’s not him.”

“It’s not all him. But what if the real him is in there somewhere? What if the real him can feel the pain his body feels?”

“It’s not him, Arya. Bran isn’t anywhere in there. If you knew the sorts of things he’d said to me, the things he’d put in my head…Bran isn’t capable of that.”

She’s still frozen, her pained eyes weighing on Bran. Jon feels Dany’s hand slip from his; he watches her walk over to Arya and murmur something, her hand sinking into his sister’s moments later. She pulls gently on Arya’s hand, and after one more look at Bran, Arya relents to the pressure and walks with her. Dany doesn’t drop her hand; she takes Jon’s in her other and walks between them, holding tight to both Starks. Jon meets Arya’s eyes over top of Dany’s head as they make their way back to the Maidenvault, thinking suddenly, with a surge of emotion: this is my family. He hadn’t even
known how terribly he wanted Arya and Dany to find family within one another until they had. He’s not sure he’s ever felt this content.

Arya parts ways with them at the Maidenvault doors. “I’m going to go shoot with Beetle,” she says, gesturing towards a Hornwood soldier on the fringe of the courtyard at the archery targets.

Jon’s head turns in the other direction, sensing where Ghost is. He locks eyes with him. *With her,* he implores, and Ghost understands. He leaves the remains of a chicken behind on the ground and makes his way towards the archery targets. It’s only then that Jon feels okay to leave her alone.

Daenerys waits at the doors until Ghost has reached Arya. Then she responds to the tighter hold of Jon’s hand, moving to lean against his side. He wraps an arm around her waist, fingers pressed to the side of her swollen stomach, his heart slipping easily into the tempo he’s come to expect while touching her. She leans her head against his arm, and they walk slowly but steadily into the Maidenvault, up the stairs, down the corridor, never putting space between themselves. Jon opens the door to their chambers and holds it open, his heart migrating towards his throat, every cell in his body practically aflame. Every touch to her and from her— no matter how innocent— feels like something tugging at the pit of his stomach, and when he closes the door after Daenerys, the heaviness of her gaze tells him he’s not alone in that feeling.

He’s torn between his desire to cradle her face in his hands again and kiss her tenderly— and his desire to yank the knot at the back of her neck undone so the violet silk of her dress streams to the floor. She chooses for him, walking over and setting her hands against his chest, her lips seeking and finding. Her kiss is slow, agonizing heaven. He kisses her back just as reverently, his entire body trembling with want, his hands going up to touch her hair rather than yank at the ties of her dress. His fingertips dance at her hairline as hers move to his face, and when she deepens the kiss, he buries his fingers as well into her hair as he can. The kiss turns harder, fiercer— Jon finds himself tugging at her updo, pulling at the crown of braids until he can slide his fingers freely through loose strands. He twists her hair around his fingers, drinking in the taste of her mouth, and when she takes one step towards the bed, he responds in kind. Her fingers pull expertly at his belt as he walks her towards the mattress, just as nimble now as they’d been before he left, and when they reach the bed, he finally lets his fingers go to the tie of her dress. It’s achingly easy to untie it; the fabric falls fluidly to the floor, leaving her unclothed— and Jon’s entirely overwhelmed. He feels that way every time he sees her naked, but the intensity of it is amplified now. His love is a physical ache in his chest; he can’t kiss her deeply enough, touch her long enough, hold her tightly enough.

“I love you,” he hears her say, her voice trembling with some combination of desire and breathlessness. He’s covering her body with his, his lips making their own journey south, but he pauses at those words, affected by the quivering softness of her tone. When he looks up at her— silver hair tousled, cheeks flushed, lips red, eyes a burst of deep color— he thinks he can feel the love filling her as easily as she must feel the love filling him. They are one in this as they are in everything else, together here in this feeling.

He loves her, too— undeniably, senselessly, wildly. And he intends to show it to her just as ardently as he whispers it back, his lips brushing her skin with every word.

VI.

Peace is a quiet, steady thing. It’s been so long since Dany has felt it that she almost forgets the nature of it and its unassuming sweetness. Peace asks for nothing and seeks nothing; Dany almost can’t remember another time in her life when she’d been as content to just *be* as she is now, though the night of her wedding comes to mind.

The bathwater is much cooler than Dany would have preferred, both for Jon’s sake and because
she’s been told hot water baths aren’t good for her baby. The warmth the water lacks is compensated by the warmth of Jon seated behind her, his arms wrapped tight around her so that his forearms rest just beneath her breasts and above the rise of her stomach. If she can’t be heated by the water, she can at least be warmed by his lips against her neck and his embrace.

She had been desperate to speak with him for a month now, but as they sit together in the tub, she doesn’t want to say anything. His physical presence is enough. She lays her head back against his chest and closes her eyes, focusing only on the sensation of his lips pressing her skin and the sound of the crackling fire only a few steps away. Periodically, in the quiet, she opens her eyes and studies the flames, feeling another wave of peace wash through her at the dancing shapes in the fire.

She’s not sure how long they rest there— long enough that she’s certain the water is cool even to Jon now— but it’s never long enough. She could stay there forever, and judging by the way Jon holds her, he could, too.

“Tell me of the time we’ve been apart,” he requests quietly, his words pressed into her hair. “I’ve missed hearing from you.”

His vulnerability is so enticing to her that she nearly twists and sits astride him. But she’s not in a rush to shed the warm serenity settled over her body, to replace it with pounding hearts or pleasure that’s like exploding stars. There’s plenty of time for that later; right now, it’s time to rest.

“And I, you,” she returns. She’s not sure where to start: much has happened in even the past month, and more still in the total time he’d been gone. She’s not sure what to speak of first: the public things, or the private ones.

“Should I fear you in combat now?” he asks her, his relaxed voice tilting up with what Dany knows is a smile.

She smiles, too. She takes his hand resting beneath her right breast and lifts it up, kissing the back of it.

“You are holding in your arms the new Commander of the Kingsguard for House Targaryen,” she jests.

His laughter is as delicious as his body pressing into hers had been hours before. It fills her with similar heat.

“I feel deeply protected,” he mutters, his lips gracing the skin beneath her ear. Her laughter intwines with his. “Have I been made Commander of the Queensguard, Your Grace?”

She has never felt more like your grace in her life. He touches her as if she’s even beyond grace— as if she’s crossed over into resplendent.

“No,” she tells him, struggling to keep from smiling again.

Then, his words in sync with hers: “Arya.”

“She seems to have warmed up to you,” Jon comments.

Dany turns her face and kisses the side of Jon’s neck. She smells Dothraki soap near his beard; it makes her smile. She stretches an arm up and strokes her fingers through his wet curls.

“Depends on the day you ask her,” Daenerys answers. But she knows Jon doesn’t buy that for a moment. He knows her and Arya well enough to see the slow trust they’d forged together. “She’s
not fond of sitting in the audience chamber with me for hours on end.”

“No, she wouldn’t be,” Jon agrees. “That’s not her way. But it is yours, and you do it masterfully. Dany, I know you haven’t been down there, but do you realize how much progress has been made? Walking through Flea Bottom…the things you’ve already accomplished…I never could’ve imaged it.”

He trails off. Dany cranes her head back enough to be able to look up at him, to study his deep grey eyes. They’re alight with the same fierce love she’d seen as he made love to her.

“All I can do is imagine it. It can be a better world,” she tells him quietly. “I’ve seen it. I know it. We’re going to make it so.”

“You already have,” he insists. It seems important to him that she recognize the progress she’d made, and she does, but she’s not done yet. There’s plenty more to be accomplished, plenty more chains to break, both here and around Westeros, and eventually, the rest of Essos.

“The commonfolk are healthier than I’ve ever seen them. There are little children reading. Safe homes—”

She slides up his body enough to reach his lips. She kisses him, feeling the rest of his words fall into her mouth. She doesn’t need to hear the rest. Her contentment is unparalleled: perhaps all she’s ever wanted is to know that someone she loves, who loves her back, is proud of her. Proud of the things she’s done, proud of the things she’s accomplished— proud to say they believe in her. She sets her hand against his cheek when she parts their lips, full of love so fierce it can’t be named.

“I can do even more now that you’re here at my side. We will do it together,” she says.

She feels his hand set over her left breast; after a moment, she realizes he’s feeling the beating of her heart beneath her skin. It thumps, steady and calm within her chest, and he leans down to kiss the spot her head wound had been as they listen to its pace. Somehow, that one small touch of his hand to her heartbeat makes her feel more loved than she ever has before at any time, more loved than she ever imagined she could be or would be. She isn’t even sure she deserves it.

When she looks up at him again, his smile is even softer than his touch had been. She reaches up and caresses the line of his scar, her own smile unwavering. She knows there are so many dark things they need to discuss— so many shadows lurking behind every good thing they share— but she doesn’t want to give birth to sadness. She can tell from his gaze that he doesn’t, either.

Instead, they speak of every single good thing that happened in Jon’s absence. At times, Dany struggles to find things, but she scrounges up what she can and gives it to him with all her heart. She tells him about every sword lesson, every bout of laughter she, Arya, and Grey Worm shared, every evening she spent curled beside Drogon atop the Maidenvault parapet. She shares every beautiful story every commonfolk ever shared with her in the audience hall, every smile she’d seen, every healthy, chubby baby cooing in its mother’s arms. She tells him of the first time she felt their child stir, the amazing changes to her own body, the surety she’s felt recently that their child will be fine.

He seems to struggle more than she did to come up with anything positive, but he manages it. He rests his chin against her shoulder and kisses her collarbone periodically as he tells her about Red Fly and Tyrion’s new camaraderie. He jests at his own expense as he tells her about a language blunder he’d made for over a full month before he was corrected, and Dany laughs for quite a while, feeling both slightly guilty that she hadn’t made more of an effort to teach him proper Low Valyrian before he left— but nearly squirming at the idea of Jon speaking in such familiar Valyrian, repeating words he’d learned with her astride him. Not all of them, hopefully, she thinks, a flush spreading from her
cheeks to her chest at the thought.

The first time he seems genuinely joyful is when he tells her of Ghost’s return, though Dany can tell the underlying context to it is deeply unpleasant. Still— when he tells her about Ghost curling up in his bed, she can feel the tranquility coming off him in waves. She’s so grateful for it that she wishes Ghost were there for her to pet and kiss.

All the goodness they share emboldens Dany’s heart and strengthens her resolve, so that when she begins to speak of the darkness, it’s not quite as difficult as it might have been.

She tells him every bit of it. She hides nothing. She is explicit in exactly what she saw in her head, frank in her recount of the way she’d been too afraid to even eat or drink. Her anxieties had been designed to break her down physically as well as emotionally, and for a time, they had succeeded.

He listens, never interrupting, his embrace fixed even as his expression shifts to one of pain.

“He told Tyrion and I that you would suffer a great loss and go mad because of it, that I would have to turn on you— kill you for the good of the world,” Jon tells her. “I wonder now if Tyrion was right, if it was the loss of our child the Bran was referring to. If so, it sounds as if he was trying to force that loss to happen himself.”

He would have succeeded. If Jon hadn’t stopped Bran, he would have succeeded. The night before she woke anew, her head finally empty of outside influence, she had been so unwell there would have been no rallying possible. She would have continued going downhill, and quickly.

“Why?” she has to ask.

“I don’t know,” Jon tells her, tormented. “I wish that I did, Dany. He was busy trying to break you down in every way here, busy trying to keep our child from being born, and back at Winterfell, he was busy trying to drive me to madness. He nearly succeeded.”

It’s her turn to listen, and listen she does, though every word Jon utters makes her sicker and sicker. She listens to the horrible, twisted visions he’d seen at night, and when he gets to the most frequent one— his own hand driving a dagger into her heart— she has to hold tight to his arms to keep him from moving away from her, wracked with guilt over something he could not control. Part of me was afraid that he’d shown you the same thing. That you’d be frightened of me, he says. She has never been less worried about anything in her life as she is about Jon killing her. The thought is absurd, and she tells him as much.

She can handle the vile, violent visions of brutal, often-sexualized trauma endured by her female ancestors, but she can’t handle the sound of tears weaving between his words.

“Every night I saw it, and I couldn’t make it stop. So I tried to stop sleeping because I couldn’t bear it, Dany— I couldn’t bear living through it night on end. But that only made it worse because I started dozing off during the day and seeing it in the daylight— then, eventually, I started seeing it when I was awake. I thought…— and all the while, Bran was telling me the ‘signs’ of Targaryen madness, the same things I was experiencing— I didn’t believe you could do any of the things he said, but I believed I was losing my mind. And then…Arya sent her letter, and the way she described you was exactly the way that I felt, and for a moment, I thought maybe Bran was right, that we were both losing our minds. But then Sansa mentioned Bran being able to occupy the minds of ravens… and when I realized what he must have done…” he trails off, his voice shaking with anger. “I went to speak with him. I needed to know why, I needed him to admit it, I needed to know that it was true that those horrible things came from him, that they couldn’t come from me. That I wasn’t capable of thinking of them. He said…Dany, I’ve never heard someone speak with such hate. He told me I
knew what to do…he told me I had to do to you all the things I’d seen every night, that that’s what Targaryen men do to Targaryen women, and I nearly killed him then. I wish that I had. I wish I had.”

Dany comforts him with her lips and her touch, her mind working carefully as she does to find the words needed. When she finds them, she presses her cheek over Jon’s heart-scar, and she holds him.

“What he wants is very clear,” she tells Jon. “He wants to destroy us—our family, our house. And we aren’t going to allow it.”

“I don’t know how to stop it,” he says, his anguish audible. “I don’t know, Dany.”

“You do. You do know,” she comforts him, reaching up to stroke his hair back from his face. “You knew the right thing to do. You always do. You brought him here where we can find out more, and once we do, we’ll know how to stop him, and we will. No matter what it takes.”

“What if we can’t? What if we can’t stop him?”

“Everything can be stopped. Everything. It’s just a matter of finding something strong enough to stop it.”

She doesn’t know what Jon’s thinking of, but he holds her tighter at those words, and he turns to watch the flames in the fireplace.

“A letter came for you,” he tells her a few minutes later. “In Winterfell.”

Dany sits up. The air chills her wet skin, and her hair is like a blanket of ice dripping down her back. She frowns down at Jon.

“Why to Winterfell?”

“I don’t know. I have it packed with my things from the journey.”

“What does it say? Who sent it?”

He shakes his head. “I don’t know— I didn’t read it. It wasn’t addressed to me.”

She stares down at him, her expression morphing into an affectionate smile. She leans in and kisses the edge of his jaw. “You could have read it. I hide nothing from you.”

“Well, we can read it together now.”

She’s content with that. With anything. As long as it’s together.

When the water becomes too cool to be comfortable any longer, they step from the bath. They’re in the process of toweling themselves dry when a knock fills the quiet.

“Your Grace?” Ser Davos calls.

“Your Grace?” Tyrion adds, and Dany guesses that means they’re aware they’re both in there and searching for the both of them. She and Jon share a dry look as Jon comes to stand behind her. He wraps his arms around her and pulls her back against the front of his body.

“Yes?” they ask.

“The Maester says Bran Stark is waking,” Ser Davos informs them. “Do you wish for him to
administer more milk of the poppy or let him rouse so you can speak with him?”

Dany’s eyes flutter shut, conflicted. She knows she and Jon have indulged each other long enough; they have things they need to do now, things that can’t wait for another trip to bed. But she knows what’s to come will be difficult, and she’s not sure she’s prepared for it yet.

Jon spins her to face him, his gaze questioning. Dany presses her teeth into her bottom lip as she thinks, her brow furrowing.

“There’s no use putting it off,” Jon says, but he looks about as pleased about it as Dany feels. She nods once.

“Allow him to wake. We’ll be down to the dungeons shortly,” Jon says.

She and Jon ready at a quicker pace. Dany’s fastening the tie of her dress when she stops, her hand going to the front of her stomach. She feels her child move—the movements more a deep prod than a flutter now with how she’s grown—and it stills her heart for a second. When it resumes, it’s a race of excitement.

“Jon,” she calls, turning to look at him, her hand still pressed over the movement she feels. To her, it’s strong and clear, but she can only feel the slightest nudge against her palm from the outside. Still—she thinks it may be enough. She wants it to be enough.

Jon must hear the way her voice rises with urgency. He forgoes dressing, quickly tugging his tunic over his head as he walks over to her. His eyes hold a question as she takes his hand in hers and brings it to her stomach, placing it where hers had just been. She applies firm pressure, willing her child to keep moving within her, to show Jon what they’d created together against all odds, what his decision that night to come to her chambers had wrought.

She watches his face, hardly breathing, her heart pounding so hard she’s certain it’s part of the reason their child is moving so restlessly. His questioning look morphs at once to one of disbelief, then wonder. His lips part, but he doesn’t say anything for a few moments longer. He steps closer, flattening his palm firmly over the same spot, his eyes dropping to study the shape of her stomach beneath her sea-green silks.

“Dany,” he finally says, his voice wobbly—

A knock rings through the echoing room again. Dany is impatient.

“What?” she demands, caring little in that moment for propriety. She wants whoever it is to go away and go away now.

“Forgive me, Your Grace,” Tyrion calls, though Dany doesn’t think he sounds too chagrined. “The Maester is with Bran Stark. He’s—is Jon still there?”

Dany stares into Jon’s eyes. They’re a bit misty—it makes her own burn.

“Yes.”

“Jon, Bran is asking for Daenerys. He wants to speak with her—alone.”

Jon’s hand falls from Dany’s stomach. He walks back over to his clothing and resumes dressing in furious haste.

“Tell the Three-Eyed Raven had can speak with both of us or speak to no one.”
“He says he won’t say a word to anyone else.”

Jon fastens Longclaw at his waist. His eyes are darker than Dany has ever seen them.

“We shall see,” he says—a threat.

Dany walks over to Jon and takes the hand that’s already settled on Longclaw. She peers seriously at him.

“I’m not afraid,” she says, and she’s not.

His eyes aren’t only dark—they’re wild.

“I am,” he hisses, and she feels how his hand trembles inside her grasp. “No. Dany, I’m begging you—please don’t. Don’t.”

“And if that’s the only way to get him to talk?”

“Then he will die as silent as the grave he goes into. I won’t leave your side. I won’t.”

“We need to know what he is, we need to know what to do with him, and if he needs to sit with me to talk, then I say we should consider it as our last option.”

Dany tries to hold tighter to his hand to comfort him, but he pulls away.

“Even the idea of him seeing you makes me feel sick,” he says, and Dany can’t doubt that by how shaken he appears. “I can’t send you into his cell alone.”

She steps closer and lets her hand fall on Longclaw. “You could loan me Longclaw,” she says, kidding. He is not amused.

“That’s not funny, Daenerys,” he snaps. He pries her hand from Longclaw and holds it in his. “You don’t know what he’s like. I do. You can’t go in there alone with him. No one should be alone with him, but particularly not you. You’re the one he’s trying to hurt. You can’t.”

She could. She could do whatever she liked, and as they hold their fierce gaze, she knows they both know it.

But he’s right. He’s the one who’s been with Bran. He’s the only one who can truly assess the danger. And though Dany is sure part of Jon’s insistence comes from his concern for her, she trusts his judgement. She always has.

“I won’t,” she says, and he physically relaxes at those words, his breath leaving him in a relieved sigh. “But if we can’t get the truth out of Bran in any other way, we will reconsider it.”

“Fine,” Jon agrees.

She worries he’s angry with her, but he’s already taken her hand in his by the time they make it to the Maidenvault stairs.

The walk to what remains of the Black Cells takes longer than they’d like; they’re stopped by various soldiers, some with questions or concerns and others simply with words of goodwill. When they finally make it to the Black Cells, they climb hand-in-hand over the rubble that still remains, stepping through it to the intact section where Bran’s cell is. Dany’s not surprised at all to see Arya standing outside of it, her face impassive.
“He won’t talk to me or anyone beyond asking for you, Daenerys,” Arya says. This fact seems to irritate her to no end. “I told him he’s a fool if he thinks we’re going to leave him alone with the queen.”

“You and Jon are of the same mind,” Dany mutters. She steps to the door of the cell and nods at Red Fly. He begins to unlock it, and while he does, Dany feels Jon’s hand take hers again. She turns and looks up at him. He’s visibly uneasy.

He stays by her side as they step into the cell. It’s large, dark—echoing. They turn a corner and stop, surveying Bran in a half-burnt chair. He’s accepting water from the Maester. For a second, Jon’s hand twitches around Dany’s, and she thinks he might walk over and smack the glass from Bran’s hands.

“Hello, Bran,” Daenerys greets evenly.

His eyes find hers and refuse to leave. He says nothing back. Dany feels his eyes as she walks over to his cot and sits on the edge. She feels his eyes as he turns and looks up at Jon. She feels his eyes as she sets her hand on her stomach, rubbing over her child’s restless twisting within her.

“Stop,” Jon says through clenched teeth, his voice low and furious. There’s a pause; whatever Jon wanted to stop clearly doesn’t because he tries again, his voice rising in his anger. “Stop looking at her!”

Daenerys doesn’t want to, but she forces herself to lift her gaze from the wall opposite to her and meet Bran’s eyes. He’s intent, unblinking. Dany stares back until her eyes burn from being open too long, and then she blinks and looks away for a few seconds, forcing herself to look back. His eyes finally drop from hers, but when they do, they simply move down. She feels her skin crawl every place his gaze rests: her throat, her shoulders, her breasts—her stomach. There is where it rests.

Jon stands and withdraws Longclaw so fast that it whistles through the air. Dany has never seen him like this—full of such mindless rage. It makes it all just a bit more frightening.

But she’s Daenerys Stormborn of House Targaryen. What, really, is Bran? Magic? She cares little; she is magic. She always has been, always will be. She walked out of infernos without so much as a singe, she brought three dragons into this world, she conceived a child in a barren womb. So what of Bran Stark?

“Would you like to see it?” she asks him, her voice traveling calmly through the echoing cell.

Jon’s head spins to look at her. She can feel her heart pounding steadily with rage, but she maintains a neutral, unaffected expression. She hears a memory of Arya’s voice: “Don’t grimace. Don’t show me how hard you’re working to keep your sword up. If your opponent sees that struggle, they’ll work even harder, thinking they’re close to defeating you.”

The Three-Eyed Raven finally speaks. “Would I like to see what?”

Dany stands. She feels Jon move with her, but she pays little mind. She takes slow, measured steps towards Bran, stopping just out of reach, her hands setting back on her stomach.

“My stomach,” she says. She studies his face. “You seem quite interested in it.”

His eyes move reluctantly from her stomach to her eyes. He smiles. It’s cold, eerie, but Dany forces her own return smile. Hers, she knows, is sardonic. And she has no intention whatsoever of lifting her dress and showing him her skin, but she thinks offering it might throw him a bit, and it appears to for a moment. He thinks carefully before he answers and almost looks unsure of what to say.
“No,” he finally says. She feels like she’s won for a moment, but that victory is short-lived. “It would be unnecessary. I can see whatever I’d like to see whenever I’d like to see it.”

Jon is going to have to leave, Dany is certain of it. Because at that vile statement, he has Longclaw at the Three-Eyed Raven’s throat—and that truly does them no benefit at all.

The Three-Eyed Raven ignores Jon even now, with his sword as his throat. He doesn’t look away from Daenerys for a second, not even when Jon presses so hard his blade draws a bit of blood.

“He’s trying to get a rise from you,” Dany tells Jon, her eyes still on the Three-Eyed Raven’s. “It’s easier to chop off the head of an angry snake that lashes out than one who hides in the underbrush.”

The Three-Eyed Raven laughs, and it’s such an unnatural sound that Dany has to fight back her shiver. One peal turns into two, and two to three, and then he appears positively deranged, as if he can’t stop the laughter once it’s started—as if he’s forgotten how to. For the first time, Dany takes a step back from him, her arms wrapping around the front of her stomach. Her child is moving more now than she’s ever felt: it frightens her.

It seems to physically hurt Jon to move away from the Three-Eyed Raven. He paces the cell, Longclaw still drawn, his shoulders trembling with rage. Dany’s own rage is colder. She knows, when she finally lets it thaw, the heat of it will be enormous.

“I’m glad I could humor you,” Daenerys comments coldly when his laughter gradually panders off.

The Three-Eyed Raven smiles again. Daenerys wonders how a smile can appear so much like a threat.

“Would you like to see it?” he asks her.

She keeps her face neutral. “Your stomach? No, I shouldn’t think so.”

“Your child,” he clarifies.

She blinks, not expecting that. And then she feels pressure begin to gather at the crown of her head, moving down, squeezing fiercely—she sees a flash of flames, a white-capped wave—

She’s the one who lashes out this time. She looms over him, trembling, her hand clenching the front of his throat. She squeezes without any prior thought to what she’s doing, fear and outrage overcoming her. She chokes him ’til she hears him gag, ’til the pressure evaporates from her mind, and then she hears her own voice bounding around the cell.

“If you ever try that again, I will have my dragon slow-roast you alive and then I will feed you to Jon’s direwolf!” She steps closer so that her knees are pressed against his motionless legs, her hand moving from his throat to his face. She grips it between her hands, hard, her nails pressing into his skin, feeling sick with anger. She stares furiously into his eyes. “You are alive right now because I will it. The moment I no longer care for you to be breathing, you won’t be any longer. Think very carefully before you ever try to violate me again.”

She doesn’t think he can even feel pain. That’s the only explanation for how he doesn’t flinch at all or try to move from her grasp. He’s motionless, calm.

“Oh, but she looks so beautiful, Daenerys,” he murmurs. “Wouldn’t you like to see her?”

His knuckles press into her stomach, and she reacts as if she’s been struck. She shoves his face, stepping back from him and out of his reach, her arms wrapping around her stomach as she shakes.
“Do not touch me!”

She has little to say in complaint when Jon pins the Three-Eyed Raven’s offending hand to the arm of the chair, Longclaw still clenched in his other.

“I should chop your hand off,” Jon growls.

Dany nearly tells him to. She’s not sure why it has affected her so horrifyingly, but she can’t stop trembling as if he’d held a knife to her stomach. She knows something dangerous just happened even if she’s not sure exactly what that something was.

The Three-Eyed Raven still doesn’t so much as look at Jon, much less respond to his threat. Dany turns her back to him, but she can feel his unrelenting gaze, and she thinks he’s satisfied by the way she’s trembling. She squeezes her eyes shut and smooths her hand down the front of her stomach, trying to calm down. She can’t stop herself from thinking of one of the recurring night terrors she’d had: someone slicing her stomach open, from the topmost swell of it to her pubic bone, her baby spilling out of her. The Three-Eyed Raven has no physical weapon at all, but she feels like that was somehow the threat she just faced.

With her back still to him, Dany asks: “What are you aiming towards?”

“The same thing as you,” he answers. “Tell me, Daenerys…look at me.”

She refuses because he’s told her to. She stands with her back to him, stubborn.

“Look at me,” he repeats, firmer, and Dany closes her eyes. Jon had written to her that they should want whatever Bran doesn’t; she hopes it’s true.

She has earned a brief glimpse at genuine emotion: the Three Eyed Raven’s next words are brimming with hatred so cold it frightens Dany.

“When she rips her way out of you and you bleed out, as alone and frightened as your worthless mother was, will you think it was worth it?”

Don’t turn around, Dany tells herself. Don’t let him see you afraid.

“I suppose we will never know. That won’t be happening,” she answers. She at least sounds composed, even if she doesn’t feel it. “You tire me with your incompetency. Am I meant to die at Jon’s hands or in childbirth? Your false prophecies should, at the very least, be consistent.”

He responds quickly, though when he does, it’s in High Valyrian. It takes Dany a moment to process what he’s saying, not because she can’t understand what he’s saying— she can— but because she’s never heard those particular phrases uttered in anything but Dothraki and it takes her aback.

“When the sun rises in the west and sets in the east. When the seas go dry and mountains blow in the wind like leaves. When your womb quickens again, and you bear a living child—only then will you be free from me. Kill me— dash the eyes from my skull— and you will still feel my gaze wherever you are for as long as you live. I will rot his brain from the inside out until he holds you down and buries a dagger so far into your heart that you drown in your own blood.”

Dany spins around. Her eyes don’t meet the Three-Eyed Raven’s, though; they meet her lord husband’s dark, burning gaze instead. She thinks he knows just enough Valyrian to understand the gist of that.

She could easily speak out of rage, but she forces herself to think her words through as much as she
can. It’s clear that the Three-Eyed Raven is going to do little but torment them; he seems unlikely to offer any valuable information of his own accord, and Daenerys certainly isn’t going to stand here being threatened and harassed. The things he has done to them go beyond treason, beyond cruelty, and he will die screaming for them. But how? And when? Is it right for her to worry that killing him with unleash something into the world—or is that unfounded paranoia?

They have to have answers, that much she knows. And they will take them by whatever means necessary.

She spares one last look at the Three-Eyed Raven, making sure her face is devoid of all expression. And then she looks back at Jon.

“Cut off his hand,” she says, emotionless.

She expects at least a moment of hesitation from her honorable king, but she gets something different.

“Which would you prefer?” her husband asks, a dark edge to his words that she has never heard before. “The right or the left?”

She blinks, considering the question briefly.

“I care little. Surprise me,” she decides.

Jon swings Longclaw without hesitation, choosing his right, the same one he’d touched Dany’s stomach with. Moments before the blade makes contact, Jon suddenly stops the sword. Dany doesn’t have to question why: Bran’s eyes are rolled back in his head, all-white exposed. Jon curses loudly, the cry reverberating off the stone walls. Dany stumbles back and sinks onto the edge of the cot, her legs growing weak.

“Where did he go?!”

She knows not. Anywhere. Everywhere.

“There’s no point mutilating him,” she realizes. Hopelessness creeps up on her. She knows Jon has realized it, too. “He’s not afraid of our threats because he knows he won’t have to feel any of them. He’s not afraid of execution because he knows he can just go to a different body.”

“Indefinitely?”

Dany doesn’t know. She shakes her head.

“If we kill him while he’s in this body then he can’t go anywhere else—”

“How can we keep him from leaving it right before you swing the sword? You saw how quickly he just did it—”

“So we wait until he comes back, knock him unconscious again, and then kill him while he’s trapped.”

“Assuming he comes back to this body at all,” Dany says, and Jon grows quiet at that. She looks at him. “We can’t solve this alone. We need to contact the Citadel; we need information.”

“Tyrion’s already doing that, but Dany… I don’t think this is anything anyone has ever seen before.”
She thinks he’s right, but it does them no good to say it.

And it’s a childish thought, one she had had often growing up, but as they reluctantly leave the cell, Dany can’t help but wonder: why me?

VII.

Their undersized small council is in an uproar.

Dany sits calmly at the head of the table and watches as Arya and Lord Tyrion get into a screaming argument, Ser Davos interjecting every couple of words, Jon doing his best to do the same.

“**AFTER THE THINGS HE’S DONE THE BEST THING WE CAN DO IS SLIT HIS THROAT IN HIS SLEEP—**”

“**THAT’S THE STUPIDEST THING WE COULD DO!** We don’t know his full abilities! We don’t know if he’ll disappear from this world or simply move to a different host because we don’t know what he is! And what if there’s a way to get whatever it is—it— the Three-Eyed Raven or something masquerading as such—out of Bran?!**”

“**BRAN IS GONE! HE’S GONE! The most we can offer him is mercy for his body and he will only find that in death!**”

“I think there’s another solution we can come to if we can just put our heads together—” poor Ser Davos is interrupted again by another round of screaming. Dany locks eyes with Jon across the table. He stands.

“**Be quiet!**” he thunders, his voice echoing throughout the council room. Every pair of eyes turns to him. “You’re not helping! Any of you!”

“That’s because he—”

“That’s because SHE—”

“Enough,” Dany orders. “I forbid you from arguing any longer!”

The tension filling the room is nearly as weighty as the fear. Bran has yet to return to his body, and they are all on edge because of it.

“**Your Grace,**” Ser Davos says, visibly grateful that the yelling has stopped, “I think we should consider other options.”

“Like what, Ser Davos?”

“Mental poisons. The maesters have a range of poisons at their reach, as do the Red Priestesses that serve the Lord of Light. Surely one of these poisons could render him unable to ‘leave’. If we can slip him one without him knowing, he won’t be able to flee before it takes affect.”

“It still brings us no closer to knowing who he really is or what he really wants,” Tyrion says, frustrated.

“What will bring us closer to that?” Daenerys asks. “What are you thinking, Lord Tyrion?”

“I think we should send for the Red Priestesses Ser Davos spoke of. But not just for poison. I think we should send for their counsel.”
Daenerys exchanges another look with Jon.

“What does the Three-Eyed Raven have to do with the Lord of Light?” she asks.

“I don’t know,” Tyrion admits. “But both of them have something to do with you. And Jon. And I don’t think that connection is a coincidence.”

“With me,” Dany repeats flatly, unconvinced.

“Yes. You remember Melisandre’s words. *The prince or princess who was promised.*”

Dany does. She remembers feeling excited by those words, hopeful. It had been nice to think that she was destined by a god to achieve what she was setting out to achieve. But it ultimately means nothing now. The Army of the Dead was defeated—if she were ever truly the princess who was promised, she’d served her duty.

“A prophecy that’s been fulfilled. We brought the dawn, Jon and I. We united our forces and defeated the Night King, the darkness.”

Tyrion gestures around them. “Have we?” he asks sarcastically. “It still feels very dark to me, what with the Three-Eyed Raven mind-hopping around King’s Landing.”

Jon’s frustrated. “This has nothing to do with—”

“Did you give Daenerys the letter that came for her in Winterfell?” Tyrion interjects.

Everyone looks at Jon.


Lord Tyrion heaves a deep sigh. He sets his elbow on the table and rubs warily over his eyes. “Because I read it, and I think it contains important information that you need to know.”

Dany’s taken aback. “You read it?”

“I thought you were trying to earn her trust back,” Arya snaps, disgusted. “Not earn an execution for treason.”

“Yes, yes, I’m terribly sorry,” Tyrion says. “Execute me if you must, but I took it because, at the time, the king was out of his mind with what Bran was doing to him. I was afraid he wouldn’t remember to give it to you, and I knew it was important—I knew someone needed to know what it said.”

“And you couldn’t hold onto it for him if you were concerned about him forgetting to pass it along?” Ser Davos points out.

“No, I couldn’t. Red Fly was watching me. I had no choice but to give it to Jon, and had I taken it, someone might have known it was gone. So I read it.”

Daenerys isn’t sure how she feels about that. Being her Hand, he often reads her ravens, but when he’s with her. Not behind her back.

In the current situation, though, his sneakiness seems unimportant.

“What did it say?” she asks.
He pulls a small writing book from his pocket. “I wrote it down, but I’m afraid I’ll have to have you do the translations. I’m unsure about the accuracy of mine.”

He slides the book across the table towards Daenerys. She slaps her hand down on it, stopping it before it slides off the edge. She opens it up to the ribbon marking the location of the prophecy in question.

“The original High Valyrian is at the top. My attempted translation is at the bottom.”

Dany’s eyes scan the Valyrian first.

“The last word you didn’t know has no direct translation into the Common Tongue,” Daenerys informs him. She’s puzzled by it. “At least— not one that I know of.”

“That would explain my struggle, then,” Tyrion mutters. “What is the correct translation?”

She studies Tyrion’s translation. He was close—but there were multiple places he was wrong, and they were important ones.

Grey Worm joins them quietly right as she’s about to speak, taking his seat to Dany’s left. Dany pauses and looks to him.

“Well?”

“Still away,” Grey Worm answers, and everybody shares uneasy looks. “What are we discussing?”

Dany reads him the High Valyrian word that she doesn’t know, hoping Grey Worm can help her make sense of it, wishing not for the first time that day that Missandei was here. She would know.

Grey Worm is as puzzled as she is.

“I do not know,” he tells her. “If you do not know, maybe it does not exist.”

“A made-up word? I doubt it,” Daenerys says, troubled. “The rest is certainly not made up.”

“What does the rest of it say?” Jon presses.

Dany turns her eyes back to the High Valyrian. She translates it aloud into the Common Tongue as she rereads it. “The time has come to break the link between the imposter and family, for there are terrors hidden within that seek to destroy the prince or princess who was promised. All—I don’t know what this word is; I have never seen it nor heard it—has many faces, and the dragon has three heads. Guard yours, and look to the flames. R’hllor will guide.”

Silence fall over them, as complete as the cover of darkness. Dany meets Arya’s eyes across the table. They share an uneasy look. She wonders if she, too, is thinking of their conversation a month ago. Evil has many faces.

“Could you write that down?” Lord Tyrion all but begs. “Just below my translation—that changes many things—here, let me get ink—”

“There’s no point,” Ser Davos says firmly. He rises. He peers at each of them carefully, finally meeting Dany’s eyes. “With all due respect, Your Grace, and you know I harbor a great amount, I have watched more people than I care to think of run themselves to madness over this prophecy of the one who was promised, only for it to mean nothing in the end. I agree with Jon: I don’t think this will help us any.”
Dany, who holds a great deal of respect for Ser Davos, too, respects his honesty, but she doesn’t agree. To her, Tyrion has a point: both this prophecy and Bran seem to keep coming back to her. Why?

“That may turn out to be true, Ser Davos,” Dany allows. “But I don’t think it would hurt to host this Red Priestess, just to find out more about this letter, and to see if she has any information about Bran that we are lacking. If this prophecy turns out to be little more than a fool’s errand, we can always follow your previous suggestion and see if she knows of any substances that might disarm Bran.”

Dany seeks Jon’s eyes at the end of her statement. She wants to make sure he’s on the same page as her. He nods once, firmly, and that’s enough for Dany.

“Send for this Red Priestess,” she tells Tyrion and Davos. “Do what needs to be done to get her here as soon as possible.”

“Yes, Your Grace,” Ser Davos says.

“Have there been any issues from the North?” Jon asks.

Daenerys hadn’t even thought to fill him in on what has happened North since he’d left. Mainly because nothing of much importance did, and Bran’s threat had left little room to worry about such small matters.

“House Stark pledged fealty to Queen Daenerys and King Jon in front of the Northern lords the day you departed Winterfell. Lady Stark was issued a summons south to be met by the end of the coming month,” Ser Davos answers. “She departed Winterfell two weeks ago to answer that summons.”

Daenerys had regarded that specific raven with reluctance, not wishing to rush that particular council meeting, but now, in light of the things Bran had done and said, she has no time to worry about Lady Stark. She will deal with that when it comes.

VIII.

Jon is quiet on the walk from the Maidenvault. Daenerys clutches his arm and rests her head against him, hoping to provide some measure of comfort that way. It’s the only kind she can give now; she has no better answers than any of the people in the council room had.

“I don’t know what comes next,” Jon admits to her, coming to a stop near a particularly resilient oak. It had withstood the siege beyond a few charred sections of bark, a few shredded branches. Beneath its shade, he takes her hands in his. “But we need to stay together for it, no matter what it is.”

That hadn’t been in question for Daenerys. Not for a moment. They had learned the hard way that they’re weaker apart.

“And we will be,” she vows.

“No matter what plans others have for us. No matter what prophecies we may be told we’re part of. No matter what the Red Priestess says.”

She takes his hands and moves them down, pressing them to her stomach. He steps forward in response, his thumbs caressing over her silk dress as he meets her gaze.

“Together,” she affirms. Her, him, and her. House Targaryen. He leans his face down and kisses her, his hands still holding her belly. When he breaks their kiss and rests his forehead to hers, it occurs to her. “The dragon has three heads.”
He meets her eyes, and the look they share makes her shiver despite the tepid air.

“I don’t know of prophecies, or this Red God, or images in the flames,” Jon tells her, “but I know of this. Of you, of me, of our daughter. And I will cut down anyone who stands in the way of us.”

She wonders, standing there, the words from the letter twisting through her brain, if this prophecy is not what Bran is trying to prevent after all. Them, together— unstoppable. The three heads of the dragon. Perhaps his goal is really just a smaller one at the cusp of a much larger one. Perhaps his goal is simply to stop whatever goal she and her family are being guided towards, at whatever cost.

“As will I,” Daenerys swears. *With fire and blood.* She thinks it’s likely that she’ll see both of those before it’s all said and done.
The Starks of Winterfell

Chapter Notes

Not to be dramatic (while being very dramatic), but this story is kicking my ass...this chapter in particular cost me 10 years of my life, deepened my caffeine dependency, and left me wondering why I ever let my 4th grade teacher talk me into taking up creative writing. I went thru it...prayers for me in my troubling time.

That being said, your thoughtful comments last chapter were a ray of sunshine. So many of your comments are so funny/insightful/interesting that, if I let myself, I could jabber back in the comments for a week straight if I wasn't so busy raking myself over the metaphorical coals in Pages. Know that I love you...is that all right??

Thanks so much for reading. I thought the length of Ch 6 was a one-time thing, but it seems to have become a pattern. I AM DOING MY BEST...can't promise it will change, BUT I can assure I am doing my best 😊

I.

“You’re not listening any longer, are you?”

The sudden switch to the Common Tongue gets Jon’s attention, as well as Dany’s hand falling from his back. He turns and glances back at her, sheepish, but she doesn’t look upset with him; on the contrary, she’s smiling softly, her eyes warm. She fiddles absently with the edge of the current page she’s reading from in the High Valyrian text.


Possessed by peace, is what he’d like to say. It’s far more accurate. Sitting there on the bed, his wife lightly running her nails up and down his back as she reads aloud, the early-morning breeze from the open window cool and gentle against his bare skin, is enough to relax him so much he could easily slip back to sleep.

He hears the old text wheeze shut, the spine creaking in protest. He has protests of his own.

“No, I’m listening now,” he insists. The last thing he wants is for her to stop: his daze hadn’t been from disinterest in their ‘lessons’, but rather, perhaps, a sign of too much enjoyment. He looks back at her again. It’s painstaking, and slow, but he adds, firmly: “Iksan rībagon.”

Her smile returns. Her face, framed by the loose silver waves of her hair, is as radiant as the sun rising outside their window. He can’t help but smile back, the softness he feels for her soaking his expression.

“Nyke ādra daor pāsagon īksā,” she murmurs, smiling, and when she leans forward and grasps his chin to bring him in for a kiss, he can feel her smile against his. His brain slowly picks her words apart— he thinks he gets the gist.

“I am,” he insists again. His words are firmer. “Iksan…Iksan…listening. I am listening, Dany. I’m enjoying it, even.”
She releases his chin and slides back to lean against the headboard as she’d been moments prior.

“You won’t learn just by listening,” she reminds him. “You have to try and translate what I’m reading in your head, and you’ve got to speak, too.”

He knows exactly how to say what he says next, so there’s no hesitation.

“Kessa, ſuha dāria,” he vows, allowing his tone to drop just a touch lower, teasing.

He’s extremely pleased to find her cheeks a bit pinker when he glances back at her again. She opens the book back up with one hand, her right finding his back once more. Jon’s eyes flutter shut as she resumes stroking his skin, gentle waves of pleasure settling over him. He does his best to translate what she’s saying into the Common Tongue in his head, struggling generously the majority of the time. When she asks him a question about what she’s read, he answers her in Valyrian, slowly but accurately.

“Tell me a story now,” she requests in Valyrian.

Jon groans. “I’m not that good yet. I can’t tell you an entire story.”

“Try,” she urges. He feels her move closer; she wraps her arms around his neck, hugging him from behind. He turns his face and kisses her arm, his heart migrating towards his throat with affection. She rests her chin against his shoulder. “Tell me about the day you found Ghost.”

He’s finding the warmth of her breath against his neck and the shape of her pressed against him distracting. “Is there a word for direwolf?”

“Zokla,” she murmurs, kissing the side of his neck. He feels her eyelashes flutter against his skin—for such a tiny, delicate motion, it causes a significant reaction within him. He feels his heart lurch, the jolt traveling from his heart to his groin. Over eyelashes? he attempts to shame himself. But he’s a bit shameless here with her. It’s one of the only places in his life he’s felt the freedom to be that.

“Zokla,” he finally tries. He takes the resulting kiss she presses to his shoulder to mean he’s pronounced it correctly. “All right…Īlin…ondoso…qelbar…”

He stops, puzzling over how to continue. It’s difficult work, and it doesn’t help that Dany’s planting kisses against his shoulder.

“How exciting,” she murmurs in the Common Tongue. He feels her nose brush against his neck, the nuzzle punctuated by another kiss, this one slightly open-mouthed. “Continue.”

“Oh, you get to speak in the Common Tongue?” he demands.

He guesses she hadn’t realized that she had. She corrects herself, her tone dry as she does. Jon laughs. He is quickly overcome with affection; he twists around and wraps his arms around her gently, dragging her over into his lap. She loops her arms back around his neck as he presses his lips to hers, kissing her with practiced, steady intensity, the kind that makes his toes curl. He cups one side of her face, his other moving to rest on the highest point of her stomach. He caresses the skin there with his thumb, and she kisses him harder, rising slightly in his lap to get closer to his lips. He’s fully intending on rolling her over onto her back and letting the fire overcome them, but their language lesson is interrupted by one of Dany’s handmaids. Dany breaks their kiss at the sound of the knock, her breath labored and her skin flushed all the way down to her collarbones.

“Yes?” Dany calls. Her fingers press into Jon’s scalp as he lowers his face and kisses the flushed skin above her breasts. That only makes him have to kiss her again…and again…and again…and again…what is
again in Valyrian, he wonders idly, his lips pressing gently to the pulse-point between Dany’s collarbones, where her blood is running fast. Arlie? Arlī? It seems to Jon an important word for him to know. How else can he tell her things such as: I am going to kiss you again, make you smile again, make you laugh again, make you trust again—

“Your meal, Your Grace,” Ezhi answers.

Jon had been hungry upon waking, but he doesn’t much care for food currently. He’d rather decorate the queen with kisses. Still, he wants Dany to eat, so he forces himself to lift his mouth from her skin. He gently nudges her from his lap so that they can get out of the bed and get decent.

“Just a moment,” Dany says, rising. Jon means to stand as well, to pull his own dressing gown on, but he’s stuck watching Dany’s progress across the room for a long moment, his heart lodged so firmly in his throat that no amount of forceful swallowing returns it to its rightful place.

Dany shrugs her dressing gown on and glances back at Jon. She lifts her eyebrows just slightly.

“Do you intend to grace Ezhi’s eyes with your nakedness?”

He spares his own body a brief glance as if remembering his unclothed state.

“Daor. Definitely not.”

She waits with a poorly-withheld smirk as he rises and pulls his dressing gown on, and it’s all he can do not to grab the fabric of her gown and tug her body back against his.

She says something to him in Valyrian that he doesn’t catch and then opens the door, inviting Ezhi in with their meal. They’d asked for it to be sent up at dawn, intending on eating in their chambers so that they may have a bit more time for practice, but Jon was certain there would be little more practice had today. Privately, he was certain the only way he was going to become fluent would be if someone other than Dany gave him lessons, as they tended to have a difficult time staying focused. Not that anyone could blame them: they spent every minute of every day attending to the needs of the people, their advisors, their kingdoms…everyone but themselves. So when Jon was finally alone with her, he craved little beyond seeing her smile and holding her.

Ezhi sets their food down on the table, chatting easily to Dany in Dothraki as she does. Jon and Dany sit across from each other at the table and Ezhi stands behind Dany’s chair with a comb in hand, brushing gently through her hair as they begin breakfast. Jon butters a piece of fresh-baked bread and looks out the window, listening idly to the two women’s laughter. He thinks about all the things they’ll need to do today as he eats, running through a list so long it exhausts him. First, they’ll have to check on Bran, though without a doubt nothing has changed as they would have heard first thing if something had. They’re on the third day of him being ‘elsewhere’, though the maesters claim he’ll have to come back soon for fear of his physical form dying. Jon can only hope that isn’t his plan. Dany seems to be convinced that Bran’s body is only a hindrance to him, that he’d be more of a threat without it, but Jon thinks there’s a reason he went into Bran in the first place. Whatever he is. He doesn’t think the entity in Bran is strong enough to survive without a primary host of some sort—if he was, why would he have remained in Bran for so long?— though they know little for sure, and won’t know anything more until the priestess arrives from Essos.

After checking on Bran, they have to meet in the council room with the Head Builder to discuss their upcoming priorities as repairs continue in the Red Keep. Then, after that, another hour or so in the council room with Tyrion and Ser Davos discussing all manner of things Jon can’t keep up with: Slaver’s Bay, food distribution adjustments, crop yield. After that, he and Dany will undoubtedly go down to Flea Bottom to check in on things—but that part he enjoys and doesn’t consider as much a
chore as the others.

He’s hardly made it through half the list before he gives up, deciding he’d rather focus on the quiet moment he’s in right now rather than thinking about the chaos to come. He spoons fruit, clotted cream, and dried figs onto his plate, watching Ezhi braid Dany’s hair as he eats. He’s impressed as he always is by how nimble and skillful her fingers are, how pretty her creation looks in Dany’s shining hair.

Dany picks at her breakfast until Ezhi is done, presumably not wanting to move too much while her hair is being fixed. Ezhi smiles at Jon before she leaves, and he smiles back, wishing suddenly that he knew how to speak Dothraki. He would like to join in on the conversations she and Dany have, the ones that make his wife light up with laughter. He thinks Ezhi must have a great sense of humor.

“I would like to visit the scholarhouse today,” Dany says, reaching for the bread. “I want to see if it’s becoming as crowded as we heard yesterday.”

Jon is certain it probably is. It’s a modest-sized building and very popular with the commonfolk, many of which have never had access to books before it, much less instructors willing to share their knowledge and skill.

“Whenever you wish, we’ll go,” Jon says. “I imagine it is crowded. Do you think there are enough tutors available to build another?”

She considers that as she lifts the pot of mint tea set in the middle of the table.

“I think so,” she decides, carefully filling the empty teacup set in front of her. She holds the pot up and arches her eyebrows— Jon shakes his head. He doesn’t care much for mint tea, and certainly less than Dany, who must drink six cups a day. She likes it cooled and warm; the steam and aroma wafting up from her current cup indicates this morning cup is hot. As always, he watches her lift the scalding mug without so much as a grimace, her fingers not even pinking from the heat. “There are always people who want to share their knowledge with others, especially for a fair wage. We shouldn’t have a difficult time finding enough of them to open another, but whether Lord Tyrion says we can allocate the funding is another matter.”

“The Others take Lord Tyrion and his coin-obsession,” Jon dismisses. “We’d sooner stop all construction here in the Red Keep than stop what’s being done in Flea Bottom. He knows that.”

“I think being crammed here in this Maidenvault is a true strike against Lord Tyrion’s ideas of royal propriety. It’s unfortunate for him, as I can’t find it in me to care much.”

Jon watches her pink lips grace the rim of the teacup, his stomach suddenly clenching. Something stirs in his mind as he breathes in the minty aroma coming off the tea, some faraway memory.

“Wait,” he tells Dany, only half-aware himself of why. She lowers the cup slightly. “Let me see it—the cup.”

She looks down at the contents uneasily before passing it across the table to Jon. He takes it by the handle, but even so, his knuckles brush the body of the scalding teacup. He hardly feels the burn of it: he’s too busy holding the cup up and letting the steam waft over his face.

It looks as it always looks. The minty smell is just the same. But as he lets his eyes close and inhales, he’s able to place a familiar, earthy smell lurking far beneath the mint. It’s so subtle it could’ve simply been carried in from the opened window, traveling from the recently-tilled earth not far below them. But as he lets the steam burn his nose, he determines it to absolutely be coming from the cup.
He is suddenly so thankful for Ygritte that he nearly trembles from the intensity of the emotion. He opens his eyes, his fingers tightening around the cup.

“Poison?” Dany surmises tightly, her face hard.

“Yes—and no,” Jon says. “It smells like moon tea, just with more mint.”

He realizes it’s possible she’s never had reason to come across moon tea in her life; even if it’s used in Essos, which it probably is, she was first a Khaleesi wanting a child, and later believed herself to be infertile.

“It’s a tea women take to stop being with child,” Jon adds. He’s surprised by how detached his own voice sounds. How, beyond the tight way he’s squeezing the teacup, he isn’t reacting at all.

“I know what moon tea is,” Dany assures him, her tone as hard as her expression. “I’ve never drank it myself, though. You’re certain?”

“No, not entirely certain. But enough that you shouldn’t drink it,” he says honestly. He passes the cup back to her; she takes it like it’s something waiting to strike her, her touch hesitant. “It’s sort of earthy beneath the mint. Do you smell it, too?” Perhaps the smell is coming from the opened window—perhaps he’s paranoid. He wouldn’t fault himself for it. He’s been looking over his shoulder for three days now, just waiting for the Three-Eyed Raven to try something. Either he finally has, or the paranoia is winning.

Her eyelids flutter shut as she focuses on the smell only. When her eyes flutter open again, the violet of her eyes is drenched in panic.

“Yes,” she tells him, her voice trembling. She sets the tea down on the table; his heart lurches with pain as her hands go to cradle her stomach, her fingers quaking as much as her voice is. “I do. Jon, I’ve been drinking mint tea for weeks—what if it’s been that all along and I didn’t know it?”

He doesn’t think he’s ever seen her so frightened. It comes over her quickly. At once, she looks as though she may be sick. It helps him compartmentalize his own fury and fear; he rises from the table and walks over, kneeling beside her chair. He takes her hands in his, pulling them from her stomach, and holds them tightly.

“You’d know if you had been drinking it for weeks, Dany. You’d be incredibly ill right now. The baby would be…she wouldn’t be okay. How do you feel?”

“Like I’m going to be sick,” she admits, her voice faint.

“Before. This morning. How did you feel then?”

She clutches tighter to his hands, her wide eyes searching his. “Wonderful,” she says, and even now, Jon feels warmth flood his chest at the notion that she felt wonderful with him. “And I felt her moving only a half-hour ago.”

His shoulders depress in his relief. He lifts her right hand up to his lips and kisses it, his eyes falling shut for a moment as he breathes through the residual anxiety squeezing his lungs. He ends up moving closer to her, resting his forehead against her thigh, his right arm moving to wrap around her hips to hold her. He feels better that way.

“It’s all right,” he says. “This is the first they’ve tried, and it didn’t work. I suppose we know what the Three-Eyed Raven has been up to.”
“Ezhi wouldn’t,” Dany tells him, upset. He hadn’t even begun considering which person, specifically, was responsible for the tea ending up in front of Dany. Dany, it seems, has. “She wouldn’t do that. If she did, she didn’t know. Bran must’ve made a kitchen girl do it— it couldn’t be Ezhi. She would never do that to us.”

It makes it all the more complicated. Jon’s first instinct is to take the head of whoever brewed that tea for his wife, but how could he take the head of someone who did it without knowing they were doing it— someone who is, by all accounts, innocent?

Yet, how could he not do something? Someone had attempted to kill their child. It was treason that bypassed all other treason; this child was the future of their house, the future of their rule. And it’s our child, Jon can’t help but think, his throat tightening. His left hand moves to her stomach of its own accord, his palm pressing firmly to the center, his fingers splayed. His eyes sear when he feels that familiar twitch beneath his palm, one he knows is movement from their baby. He presses a kiss to Dany’s thigh, wishing he knew what to do now, but he feels lost. He feels like he’s failing her, failing their baby. Failing to keep his family safe— failing to be a good husband and father, never mind a king. If anything breaks him, it’ll be that.

But if he thinks he’s a failure, it’s nothing compared to what Dany is feeling. The tears in her voice when she speaks next make him look up at her in surprise.

“I can’t keep her safe,” she realizes, her tone reaching towards hysteria. “It doesn’t matter what I do— if I don’t eat or drink, she’ll die, and if I do, someone will do this again, and she’ll die. I can’t do this— I thought that— I can’t live through what I went through with Rhaego, I can’t, I can’t, Jon, I love her, I love her— I can’t protect her, and that’s what a mother does, I am no mother, I couldn’t protect Rhaego, Viserion, Rhaegal— how long until Bran makes one of our soldiers run me through with a sword? Shall I lock myself in here as my ancestors before me? Even if she lives to be born, what next? Someone sneaks in at night and stabs her in her bed? They tear her from my breast and dash her against the wall?”

He’s chained in place by the torment flooding from her. He has never seen her unravel this way. She is physically shaking like she’s come down with a fever, her eyes wide and haunted. The most frightening thing of all is that Jon doesn’t know what to say to reassure her because nothing she’s said is particularly ridiculous or impossible.

“We cannot go on like this— this isn’t going to work. I was wrong. I thought we needed to be cautious because we don’t understand— I thought we needed to speak to others, but we don’t need to speak to anyone, and we don’t need to wait, because we can’t wait. We just need to kill him and be done with it. We can’t go on like this…I can’t go on like this.”

He doesn’t know if that’s the right answer, but he would have agreed to anything to make her feel better. He applies pressure to her hip until she turns slightly in her seat to face him, and then he parts her knees, sliding her dressing gown up enough that he may kneel between them. She watches him, her eyes wet, as he presses his lips to her stomach. Her fingers bury into his hair as he turns his face, resting his cheek there, his chest flooded with so many emotions he’s not sure which is strongest. He thinks, perhaps, his fear.

“Here is what we know,” he tells her, choosing to focus on the love rather than the fear. “You’re here and you’re healthy. Our baby is here— right here— and she’s growing every day. That’s what you’re doing, Dany— creating her, protecting her—”

“I’m not—”

“You are,” he counters, voice as firm as it is low. He turns his face and kisses just below her
bellybutton, certain of this more than anything in the world. Certain that she is a good mother above all else. “He’s making you doubt yourself. We can’t let him.”

She doesn’t respond. When he casts his eyes up towards her face, he sees her eyes have fallen shut, tears sparkling on her face.

“If it was you he wanted dead the most, this sorry attempt at giving you moon tea wouldn’t even come close. The only purpose of this was to try and kill our baby. Why, Dany?”

“He thinks her death will destroy me. It will.”

“If he just wanted to destroy you, why not try to sneak something lethal to you into your tea? It’s quicker and more effective,” Jon points out. He lifts his cheek from her stomach and looks up at her. Her hand falls from his hair. “It’s her he wants destroyed. Us, too, I am sure of that—but I think she’s the main focus and we’re the afterthought. Our deaths come tied to hers.”

She points out something he hadn’t thought of. “If he’s trying to make what he told you come true—making me go mad and kill millions—that works better if he also wants the people to turn against me. If he poisons me now and kills me, he’s only created a martyr, a tragedy. Not a villain. And a villain is what he wants to create.”

“Why would he want that, though?” Jon asks, growing frustrated. “What does he stand to gain by turning people against you?”

“I don’t know. A revolt? The Throne?” she asks dryly.

Jon doesn’t know how the tickle of amusement could break through his anxiety, but at Dany’s words and dry tone, his lips twitch just a bit. He sees Dany’s do the same, though her eyes are still wet with tears.

“The Throne,” Jon repeats, his laugh weak. He thinks of all the tireless work Daenerys does, day in and day out. The bloody Throne. He’s happy to rule with her, but that’s simply because it’s with her—he can’t say he’s ever understood the allure of the Throne itself. And the idea of someone like the Three-Eyed Raven caring about it makes him snort. “Yes, why not? All hail the Three-Eyed Raven.”

Dany laughs at that, though it breaks off quickly as she grows upset again. He holds her to him once more, his cheek resting again on her stomach, his heart rising up his throat.

“I’m starting to think we will never know what he truly wants. So perhaps it’s just better to kill him and hope it helps rather than makes it worse.”

He had once advocated for that, but he’s not sure anymore. At least, with the Three-Eyed Raven being in Bran’s body, and Bran’s body being contained, they could look at him and more-or-less know whether he’s in Bran’s form or elsewhere. If he was somehow released into the world, they’d never know where he was or what he was doing. They’d have no way of keeping even the slightest watch on him.

“We could wait until the Priestess arrives,” Jon suggests.

“Nearly another moonturn, and that’s if the winds are favorable.”

Jon thinks of what another month could bring. What it would bring. Daenerys would be closer to the birth, her state even more vulnerable than it is now. What would the stress of the Three-Eyed Raven’s uncontrollable, constant threats do to her health? Perhaps nothing—but Jon had lost his
own mother in childbirth, and Daenerys had lost hers, so Jon can’t fault himself for worrying. When
they approach the birth, he wants things as safe as possible, as stable as possible. It’s figuring out
how to get there that’s difficult.

“And killing him is what you believe we should do?” Jon asks her, knowing that if she says yes,
he’ll rise right now and make it so.

“I’m not resistant to other suggestions. I just don’t know of any. I suppose we could have the
maesters try every poison they know first; if the combination kills him, well, our decision has been
made for us. And if they somehow succeed in locking him in his own mind, our answer is clearer
than ever.”

Jon thinks to their meeting in the council room yesterday. Tyrion had insisted that he believed the
Red Priestesses could cast the Three-Eyed Raven from Bran’s body and restore Bran to them.
Thinking of killing him now, only to find out later that they could have saved him, is excruciating—
but not as excruciating as the thought of something happening to Dany. And that is a very real threat
right now, not a theory from a man who believes he has all the answers to everything.

Jon sets his hands on her thighs and presses gently, lifting himself up enough to meet her lips. He
kisses her, thinking to himself that she feels sad— he doesn’t understand it, but he senses it in
everything from the taste of her kiss to the touch of her hand. It won’t do. He still remembers all the
mistakes he’d made before, all the times he’d left her alone to fester in sadness, and he had sworn he
never would again. He stood by that promise as he stood by every other.

“What we can’t do is wait any longer,” she continues softly, breaking her lips from his. There’s an
edge of desperation to her words, to her eyes. She holds his face softly and peers seriously at him. “I
can’t give him another opportunity to try again where he’s failed.”

“We won’t,” Jon swears. He tugs her up from the chair, folding her into his embrace, his fingers
nudging her chin up so he can kiss her again. “No more waiting, Dany.”

No more. Hadn’t she waited long enough to be happy? Hadn’t he?

He searches her eyes for that look he knows so well now, searching to see what she wants— to see
what will make her feel better. He sees it in her violet eyes as she steps closer to him, her hand
working its way inside his dressing gown to trace his lowest scar, her breath a sweet heat against his
neck. He feels little guilt as his fingers bury in her hair, pulling and undoing the braids Ezhi had just
done, the softness of her stirring him. She catches his lips and kisses him fiercely. He understands,
feels the same, burns with her, beside her— lately, it seems, his desire has mingled in with the fury
he feels towards the Three-Eyed Raven, the desperation he feels to keep her safe, until it’s a force of
its own. Hadn’t he worried that might happen? Even so far back as the first time he gave himself to
her, he had wondered. How could he feel pleasure like that and not crave it for the rest of his days?
How could he not long to hear her breathless with pleasure as often as she willed it?

He holds her and takes his time, fully focused on turning her sadness to pleasure as fire turns wood to
ash, and when he does, he murmurs: “avý jorrāelan,” the honesty of it smoothing the words so that,
for a moment, he thinks his pronunciation actually sounds natural to his ears. Then again, he hardly
hears himself over the rushing of his own blood.

She corrects him breathlessly, adjusting it so that he’s speaking to her the intimate way that only
lovers may speak, and that only makes him tremble harder, overcome. He repeats the words as he
moves with her, filled with power at the thought of speaking to her as only he may, touching her as
only he may.
And in the midst of it, a strange thought comes to him, dark and forceful— vindictive: *let the Three-Eyed Raven watch. Let him see us now. Then he will know.*

He thinks with a half-wild mind that this, right now, is the antithesis to all the Three-Eyed Raven had shown to him, all he’d tried to make him do— all he’d wanted Jon to succumb to. *Let him see how she loves me, how she gasps into my mouth, how she draws me deeper, how she clutches me and comes undone. Let him see how alive she is, her heart racing under my touch, body arching and skin flushed hot. Let him see that no one can put us out.*

*Watch and see.*

II.

“That prophecy is a waste of your time. I wonder how many more times I need to tell you that?” Ser Davos greets.

Tyrion looks up from the papers in front of him. He watches tiredly as Davos enters the council room, coming to sit across from Tyrion in his typical seat. They are the only ones present.

“You’re early,” Davos adds. “The king and queen haven’t left their chambers yet.”

“You’re early, as well,” Tyrion points out, turning back to his notes. He doesn’t bother telling Ser Davos he’s been here since before dawn, pouring over Daenerys’s translation of the Priestess’s letter. The more he looks at it, the more interpretations he finds. He will admit he’s become obsessed.

“I was hoping to find you,” Davos says.

Tyrion looks up at that, mildly surprised. Davos usually seems to prefer speaking to him through Daenerys and Jon; he thinks Davos still distrusts him, though Davos has never outright said that to him.

“Well, you’ve found me,” Tyrion answers, waiting.

Ser Davos folds his hands atop the table. “I think it would be best for Queen Daenerys to leave King’s Landing until the Priestess arrives here to help us with Bran Stark. Three days now we’ve all lived in fear— I worry for what another twenty-so days of it will bring.”

He has Tyrion’s full attention. “She’s not going to leave King’s Landing. Do you know how much she went through to get here?”

“Aye, I do. And I know how much she’s lost. I’m worried for her, Lord Tyrion. We’re facing a threat we can’t understand, and I can’t help but feel as if we’re handling it all wrong.”

“You’d have us slit his throat in his sleep?” Tyrion demands. “When that may only make things worse— when we may be able to find a way to save the real Bran, an innocent boy?”

Davos shakes his head. “Lord Tyrion, even if the Priestess can use her magic to ‘rescue’ Bran Stark, I doubt there will be anything left of him. As for your first complaint, I agree with you. That is why I’m not suggesting we kill him. I’m suggesting we remove his target from his grasps. If he returns to his body and we sedate him one more, the queen can head elsewhere, and he’ll never know. Her safety now is paramount to the safety of her future reign.”

Lord Tyrion repeats himself, his tone firmer this time. “She’s not going to leave King’s Landing.”

“With all due respect, my lord, I’ve been at her side over these past few months you’ve been gone,
and it’s my opinion that she would do whatever is best for that babe.”

Tyrion wants to refute—wants to establish firmly that he knows Daenerys best, that he is the one who was with her in Essos, who followed her here—but he can’t. Davos is right: Tyrion wasn’t here for her these past three months. Still, he doesn’t think Davos’s plan is realistic.

“And where could she go? Dragonstone? Bran Stark would check there first. Winterfell, with Jon? Well, Sansa’s on her way here, so she wouldn’t be a threat, but Bran would check there, too. His sight is not limited to what is simply in front of him or in his grasps. He could find her. And he would. Meanwhile, if she leaves, we’re without our queen, and the progress we’ve built crumbles. I’ve seen it happen before.”

“Perhaps she could go back to Essos for the time being?”

“And what happens here? Westeros falls back into chaos?”

“No. We can establish a council to rule in her absence.”

Something occurs to Tyrion, though he knows before he says it that it’ll never work. “If we could convince the king to stay behind…”

“That would be far more stable in theory, yes, but Jon has made it clear that he has no intention of leaving her side again.”

“Even if it’s for her own safety? The safety of their kingdom?”

Davos shakes his head. “He won’t see it that way. And no number of lectures from us will make him.”

“Love is stupidity,” Tyrion says. “It’s blindness.”

“It can also be power. Who fights harder than someone trying to protect the ones they love? It’s love that makes our queen good—her love for her people. And, for what it’s worth, I happen to agree with Jon that he should stay at her side.”

“Unless he’s the tool that Bran is trying to use.”

Davos scowls. “If there’s a part of you that still thinks he’ll turn on the queen—”

“You didn’t see him while we were away. I did,” Tyrion says. Beneath his hand, he can feel the paper holding Dany’s translation. The time has come to break the link between the imposter and family, for there are terrors hidden within that seek to destroy the prince or princess who was promised. “He was weakened mentally. He wasn’t himself. Who’s to say Bran won’t do that again? Who’s to say he won’t find some way to—”

“Jon Snow is the strongest man I know—and the most honorable. The day he lets some villainous fool trick him into murdering the woman he loves is the day the Dornish stop making wine. You’re right to fear Bran, but you’re not right to doubt Jon. There are men out there weak and cowardly enough to let themselves be turned into betrayers, kinslayers, and queenslayers, but Jon is not one of them, and nothing you can say will ever make me believe differently.”

Tyrion lifts the translation up. “This prophecy—”

“The prophecy is shit,” Davos says, his eyes flashing with annoyance. “Stannis let that bloody thing drive him towards madness, and to what end? The evil the Red Woman insisted was coming came,
“But that’s what’s so interesting,” Tyrion says eagerly, reaching over to grab a small, cloth-bound book. “This book is one of many archival books on prophecies— not the grand, all-encompassing one in Volantis, that one is forbidden, but one with lesser prophecies released for worshipers to peruse— and Melisandre didn’t always predict that the princess who was promised would have to defeat the Night King to bring the dawn, or even the White Walkers. Listen to this—” Davos starts to object, but Tyrion talks over him— “Just listen! For one moment! You don’t believe it, fine, yes, I’ve gathered that— but if you love the queen and your honorable King Jon, you’ll listen to everything that could be any sort of risk to them!”

Ser Davos kneads over his forehead, annoyed, but he doesn’t interrupt again.

Tyrion is able to find the page quickly: he’s been looking at it so often that the book naturally falls open to that page, the spine worn and resigned.

“At one time, Melisandre reported that she saw a ‘wooden face, corpse white, a thousand red eyes floating in the rising flames. Beside him, a boy with a wolf’s face, who threw back his head and howled.’”

Tyrion looks emphatically at Ser Davos. He’s got chills from what he read, certain he’s stumbled upon some great knowledge. Ser Davos, on the other hand, is unmoved.

“I’m to take it the boy who howls is Bran Stark?”

“Yes! Yes! And the thousand eyes and the wooden face— there’s nearly nothing at all written on ‘the three-eyed raven’, but a few strange things I’ve stumbled upon seem to somehow relate him to Heart Trees and the Greensight….a wooden face and a thousand eyes! That’s not all, either— at the end, she said: ‘He saw me. He saw me.’.”

It had given Tyrion a fright the first time he read it. But again, Ser Davos doesn’t seem to care much. Tyrion wonders if he did a poor job explaining it, but he soon realizes that Ser Davos is simply immoveable on this.

“Melisandre had Stannis burn an innocent little girl alive. The Red Woman was as evil and mad as you can get. I don’t believe in any nonsense she saw her flames from her terrible Red God.”

Tyrion refuses to be swayed. “Well, I believe in not only what she said, but also what the High Priestess Kinvara said. I believe Daenerys is the princess who was promised, and I believe Bran is the enemy that must be defeated. How can you not?”

“I believe she’s Daenerys Stormborn, Queen of the Seven Kingdoms— the kingdoms who need her. That’s what I believe. That’s what matters.”

“Then you’re the perfect Hand for Jon Snow,” Tyrion says, as annoyed as Davos. “He won’t hear it, either. You’re practically of the same mind.”

“Our king has sense,” Davos shoots back coolly. “And our queen, too. I’m hoping that when I suggest my thoughts on what needs to be done, you’ll support me.”

Tyrion looks back at his notes. Not for the first time in his life, it frustrates and baffles him that people can’t see what he can see, that the knowledge that is so glaring to his mind is utterly disregarded by theirs. Especially this. If Ser Davos and King Jon love the queen as much as they say, shouldn’t they be as preoccupied with understanding this prophecy as Tyrion is?
“I will think it over.” That’s all he can promise.

III.

“Are you going to read that or just stare?”

Arya doesn’t lift her eyes from the sealed letter in her lap. She listens to Grey Worm’s approaching footsteps, turning to look once he’s stopped in front of her. There’s no where for him to sit; she herself is resting on a pile of broken stones she’d crafted as a seat. The Black Cells certainly haven’t been high on the list of areas to be repaired.

“I haven’t decided,” Arya answers. She idly traces the y in her name, her heart both rising in excitement and falling in dread. “I think stare at it.”

Grey Worm clasps his hands in front of him and nods down at the letter. “Lord Gendry?”

Arya’s eyes shift up to Grey Worm’s, surprised. He nods, clearly finding the answer to his question in her expression.

“The first time I ever felt fear was when I loved Missandei,” he tells her. Arya hears the way his voice catches on Missandei’s name, but when she looks up, his face is as composed as it always is. “Love is frightening. Being without the one you love is true fear.”

Arya shrugs her shoulders and tucks the letter into an inner pocket of her shirt. “There are plenty of things in this world that are frightening.”

“No like that,” Grey Worm says quietly.

Arya doesn’t want to talk about it, and he seems to sense that. He nods to Bran’s cell.

“Any movement?” he asks.

“No,” Arya answers. “The maester poured ice water on him and pricked his skin with needles to try and draw him back into his body, but it didn’t work.”

It was difficult for her to watch. As much as she knows it isn’t Bran, it is. Seeing his skin stabbed with needles and ice water poured over him was hard to witness, but she’d forced herself to. She has no intention of letting anybody truly torture him. If it’s Bran’s body, it’s Bran’s pain. She would rather slit his throat herself and be done with it. It’s what she’d want someone to do if it were her.

“Something happened to Queen Daenerys this morning,” Grey Worm says, and Arya feels her heart plummet to her toes. She turns to look at him, her lips parting in horror, but he quickly reassures her. “She is okay. But someone poisoned her tea.”

Arya stands. “That’s not okay.”

She thinks to how the queen had been in the throes of Bran’s torment, how she would tremble in fear any time she so much as bit into a bit of bread. The way the bones in her face had become more prominent, her wrists thinner. It’s not okay at all. She is overcome with guilt. The only reason she’s here today, and not with Daenerys and Jon, is because Ghost had been curled up outside the door to their chambers all night, refusing to go anywhere else or let anyone in, and she had felt Ghost’s protection was as good as any she could give. But Ghost doesn’t know about all the types of dangers in their world as Arya does.

“No,” Grey Worm says. “It’s not, but she didn’t drink it. They caught it before she did.”
“I don’t understand. You had your soldiers confiscate any poison they could find months ago. They searched the Maidenvault top to bottom, the ruins of the Red Keep— anywhere poison might have been stored or used under Cersei’s rule. Where did someone find poison? Has the person who did it been executed? What of the soldiers who stand guard in the kitchen— they just let this happen?”

“The soldiers didn’t realize what it was. It was a tea healers make for women who don’t want to be with child. It would have killed the baby if she’d drank it, the maester said. The kitchen girl who brewed it was passed out on the floor when Red Fly and I went to find her. They think the Three-Eyed Raven got into her head…she regained consciousness, but all she can do is repeat the same thing on a loop. Nottansy, nottansy. They think he did real damage to her.”

Arya glances in the direction of Bran’s cell at that. Her hand finds Needle. She wishes they would just let her kill him and be done with it. It was what was best for everyone.

“Where are they now? My brother and Daenerys?” Arya asks. She wants them at her side. She can’t protect anyone she can’t see. Bad things happen to the people she loves when they are far from her; she in’t going to live through that again.

“They’re on their way here with the maester. He has some poisons he wants to try.” Grey Worm pauses. “I think poisons are a waste of time.”

Arya locks eyes with him. She sees, in their shared glance, that he feels the same way about this as she does, but he would never speak against the queen or her decisions. And they both recognize that there is no easy decision here, nothing black and white.

“I do as well. But I think Jon needs to feel as if he’s tried everything,” Arya admits.

“The baby is more important that any peace of mind,” Grey Worm says firmly.

On this, Arya also agrees. It’s why she’s willing to be the one to swing the sword. She would live with that as she lived with everything else if it meant she might get to hold that dark-haired, violent-eyed baby girl even once.

“Yes. And nobody would agree with that more than Daenerys and Jon.”

Grey Worm steps a few paces to the side and peeks into Bran’s cell. Arya knows something is different at once from the way he suddenly grabs his spear, his shoulders tensing. She walks over to where he is, withdrawing Needle, and peers in.

Bran looks back at her.

Her heart pounding, Arya slowly sheaths Needle. She sets her hand on a bar of his cell.

“Hello, Bran,” she tries. He hasn’t talked to her thus far, but she’s afraid he’ll go away again if she doesn’t try something.

He appears exhausted. His hand rises to his throat, congealed with blood from the scratch he’d gotten at Jon’s hand during their confrontation three days ago.

“Water,” he requests, his voice hoarse.

Pain swells inside Arya’s chest. She glances up at Grey Worm. He frowns back.

“We should wait for the queen and king,” Grey Worm whispers.
Bran’s hand is quaking, though. His lips are so dry they’re cracked and bleeding. Arya stands there uncertainty for a moment, until she can’t bear the suffering, and then she walks over to the pile of bricks the water pitcher is sitting on. She fills a glass, and when Grey Worm catches her hand, she pulls away.

“Both Daenerys and Jon will understand why I did it,” she says firmly. She believes that. “Your queen doesn’t permit suffering. Or have I mistaken her for someone else?”

Grey Worm pauses, considering Arya’s words. And then he steps to the side and turns to unlock the cell.

Arya knows she should feel tentative, afraid, but it’s difficult now to see anything but Bran. He looks young, ill—afraid. Arya drags the single chair in the room over and sits beside his bed. She reaches out hesitantly and helps him sit, passing the glass to him afterwards. It turns out to be a mistake: his hands are shaking so hard he spills half it on himself. Arya quickly takes it back and looks over at Grey Worm.

“Could you send for someone? We need a towel or a change of clothing or something.”

He doesn’t move. “I’m not leaving you here alone.”

Arya scoffs and looks pointedly at Bran, who is now trembling so hard that Arya nearly reaches out to feel his forehead, thinking he might be taken with some sickness. Grey Worm isn’t reassured.

“Queen Daenerys wouldn’t like it,” is all he says, and Arya would like to argue with that, but he’s right. Daenerys doesn’t care for Arya being here at all, and she especially wouldn’t like her here alone. She decides she’ll wait until they arrive and then go fetch someone herself.

She meets Bran’s eyes as she carefully brings the glass of water to his lips for him, tipping it back slowly. He takes a messy sip, losing almost half of the water, and then reaches up in desperation for the glass. He clutches it tight and tips it back, draining every last drop of it. Arya swallows hard.

“More?” she asks him.

“Yes,” he croaks. She goes to stand, and then she hears, his voice tearful: “Arya?”

She freezes. She spins around, her heart jolting painfully. She studies Bran’s face, telling herself she’s imagining the familiar spark she sees in his eyes. Telling herself she’s imagining Bran.

“Yes,” she answers. She walks back over. She notices her own hands are trembling now, and her throat keeps trying to stitch shut. “Yes. It’s Arya.”

When he smiles, it’s Bran’s smile. Bran. The same smile that graced his face as a young boy. The same smile he’d give during riding lessons or whilst running around the crypts exploring with Arya. It brings tears to Arya’s eyes—she doesn’t know what to do, what to say, and she’s so afraid that if she says anything else, he’ll say something to show he’s really just the Three-Eyed Raven, and she’s not sure she can handle that heartbreak. It would feel like losing him all over again.

But his lips are still so dry; she can’t stand here gaping like a fool. He needs her. He needs his sister. She’s about to stand to go get the pitcher when it’s suddenly held out in front of her. She turns and looks up. The queen is expressionless, her eyes never leaving Bran’s. Arya hesitantly takes the pitcher, unsure when Daenerys had arrived. At Daenerys’s side, Jon stands stoically, his arm wrapped almost possessively around her waist.

They all watch the strangest series of emotions pass over Bran’s face. Joy, for a moment, as he looks...
at Jon. Confusion, next, as he takes in Daenerys, her swollen stomach, and Jon’s arm around her waist. Deep pain— he spasms, his hand reaching up to smack against his own forehead. And then, all at once, absolutely nothing at all. Cold blankness, as if someone shut the lights out behind his eyes.

Arya doesn’t have to be told a thing. She looks at his eyes, and this time, she sees the Three-Eyed Raven as easily as she sees her own reflection in a looking glass.

Arya turns to face her brother and Daenerys at once, desperate. “He was here. He was here, Bran was here, I saw it—”

“Arya—”

“No, Jon! He was! He was— he was Bran!” Arya insists, growing upset quickly. “He had his eyes and his smile and he knew me, he knew me—”

“Stop,” Jon interrupts firmly. “You’re only making this worse for us.”

“I wouldn’t lie! Jon, I saw—”

“Dany,” Jon says suddenly, interrupting Arya. Daenerys pulls from Jon’s touch and turns, walking over to the seat Arya had been in. Jon swears underneath his breath.

“No,” he insists.

Daenerys drags the seat back so that she’s out of Bran’s reach, sitting despite Jon’s protests. She reaches for Jon’s hand as soon as she’s sat, holding it tight. Comforting him.

Arya doesn’t forget what she’s seen, but she moves to Daenerys’s other side, her concern in this moment more pressing. Because Bran may have been there before, but he’s not now. Now, he’s the Three-Eyed Raven, and he’s looking at Daenerys as if she’s prey.

“You really hurt that girl,” Daenerys says to Bran. “And all for naught. It’s yet another thing you’ll have to answer for.”

He cocks his head to the side. “And who might I be forced to answer to? You?”

He laughs. Arya’s feels she could burst with pride and admiration when she looks at Daenerys: she’s smiling calmly, not showing a bit of reaction to Bran’s taunts.

“Perhaps. Or the king. Or our dragon. Or our direwolf.” Daenerys leans in— not close enough that the Three-Eyed Raven could touch her, but close enough that, when she whispers, it seems truly meant for only his ears. “If I’m feeling particularly nice, I’ll let you choose.”

His smile slides from his face quick as a blink. Her confidence seems to bother him. He only appears more bothered when the maester enters, carrying a glass of a dark brown liquid with him.

“She is how this works,” Daenerys tells him. “You will drink every last disgusting drop of this. If you refuse, we will chain you down and force a tube down your throat and give it to you that way. Again, I present you with a choice. I’m a big proponent of those— choices.”

Arya looks desperately at Jon. He meets her eyes, giving her one small nod. Arya doesn’t know what that means: she hopes it means whatever that dark liquid is won’t kill Bran, but maybe he’s telling her that this is what needs to be done. And it’s not. She saw Bran— she did. How can she stand by and let them destroy him now?
The Three-Eyed Raven is quiet. He laughs again a few moments later.

“A truth poison?”

“Yes. The first of many poisons we have here to try, most of which were sent to us from maesters all around the realm. We don’t intend to leave here until you— whatever you are— are gone.”

“Then you’d better send for more chairs,” the Three-Eyed Raven comments.

Daenerys nods at Grey Worm, who carries the glass over to Bran.

“Drink,” Daenerys orders, her voice more commanding than Arya has ever heard, yet somehow still ringing sweet. It’s the duality of it that makes Arya’s hair stand on end. “Now.”

Arya can’t help but be taken aback: she’s never seen Daenerys like this before. She looks to Jon, wondering if he has, but he doesn’t look surprised at all. Rather, he’s watching the Three-Eyed Raven intently, his hand set on Longclaw.

The Three-Eyed Raven seems to decide drinking it is in his best interest. He takes the glass from Grey Worm and begins drinking steadily from it. If it tastes unpleasant, he doesn’t show it. He drains the glass in a surprising amount of time and then thrusts it back at Grey Worm.

“As it pleases you, Your Grace,” the Three-Eyed Raven comments, but Arya hears it for what it really is: fuck you.

“Oh, it pleases me,” Daenerys assures him. “It should set in soon. What shall we talk about as we wait?”

“Hmm,” the Three-Eyed Raven muses, his tone dripping with rancor. “Other things that please you.”

His eyes shift to Jon. Arya sees Jon’s hand tighten on Longclaw. It takes her a second to understand what the Three-Eyed Raven is saying; she’s shocked before all else, having never seen this side of the Three-Eyed Raven. Where he’d been listlessly indifferent before, he’s cold and malignant.

“We should gag him,” Grey Worm tells Daenerys, disgusted. “Until the drink takes effect.”

“No, let him talk,” Daenerys says, unaffected, her eyes still on Bran. “Fools who speak in hatred show more than those who sit in silence.”

The Three-Eyed Raven only has eyes for Jon now. The look they share is long and full of hostility; Arya can’t help but feel as if they’re having a silent conversation.

“You saw,” Jon states rather than asks, his voice cold and sharp as ice. “Good.”

The Three-Eyed Raven is quiet so long Arya thinks he won’t respond. She doesn’t know what it is that he saw, but whatever it was appears to have truly infuriated him.

“You think you’ve outsmarted me,” the Three-Eyed Raven finally hisses. “You’re an idiot.”

“You’ve failed,” Jon says simply. He steps closer to the bed, peering down at the Three-Eyed Raven, his eyes hard. “I will never do what you want. I will never turn against her. Ever. I don’t give a damn what you try. You’ve tried a lot. And you’re further away from that goal that you’ve ever been. I would drive a dagger through my own heart before I plunged one into hers. Make her go mad— I still won’t do it. Have her raze King’s Landing, Dorne, the Iron Islands, Winterfell— I don’t
care. At the end of the day, when she comes home, covered in ash and soot and blood, it’ll be just like what you saw.”

For the first time, Arya looks at Jon and she sees a true Targaryen. She’s not sure how that makes her feel. She knows, of course, that he doesn’t mean that. He would care if Daenerys set flame to the world. But he knows as well as Arya does that Daenerys wouldn’t. Despite Arya knowing that, she can’t help but look at Jon in surprise because he delivers those words so intently, so darkly, that she almost believes him.

“You think you’re in control of yourself?” The Three-Eyed Raven taunts. He lifts his eyebrows. “Do you really think that, Jon? Truly? Passion has two faces: one may be love, but the other is violence.”

Jon shakes his head, adamant. Arya’s glad for it.

“No. It won’t work. And I think you know that. Is that why you hurt that girl? You’re getting desperate?”

The Three-Eyed Raven scowls. “I didn’t intend to do that to her.”

Right after he admits that, his face folds in irritation, as if he hadn’t meant to say the words he had. Arya glances quickly at Daenerys. Daenerys smiles softly, so quickly that Arya nearly misses it. She guesses the poison has taken effect.

“Yet you did. I can only assume you did something different to her than you did to Daenerys and me,” Jon presses.

He seems to struggle with something— Arya wonders if he’s trying to resist the urge to speak. He’d certainly seemed confident before that the poison wouldn’t work on him. That must be why he looks so panicked now.

“No,” he finally answers, losing some battle of wills with himself. “It was exactly what I tried to do with you and Daenerys. Only, this time, I was successful. The girl’s brain was easy to get into.”

“And ours are not?” Daenerys questions.

He glances at her, still scowling. He reaches up to press over his forehead, but of course that does little to help. Arya can almost see the moment the poison completely releases all his inhibitions: his hands drop from his face and he relaxes against the headboard, serenity washing over his features. Arya sees Jon step closer to Daenerys; the look the two share is nothing short of victorious.

“No,” the Three-Eyed Raven finally answers. He’s staring at the wall now, answering without even realizing that he is. “With significant effort, I can get in just enough to plant ideas, visions, and sometimes, emotions— especially you, Jon; you proved a bit more challenging, Daenerys— but I can’t get fully in like I could with that girl. Warging into humans is difficult, and often impossible, but the weaker the mind, the easier it is. I nearly got into your mind that way, Daenerys, when you were flying your dragon over King’s Landing. It’s what I’d planned for for so long. I helped orchestrate all your loses, I ensured that Jon found out about his true identity at the worst possible time to push you two apart, and right when I was about to take advantage of your mental weakness, you were knocked unconscious. I couldn’t do a thing through you with you passed out in bed. I had to regroup. Re-plan.”

Arya and Grey Worm exchange a look. Arya thinks suddenly of Grey Worm’s words from earlier. *Being without the one you love is true fear.* She admires how tall he’s standing, how strong he is to not plunge his spear into the Three-Eyed Raven’s chest right this moment at the implication that he
knew Missandei was going to die— and let it happen anyway. Worse, that he had planned for it—
hoped for it.

“Had you succeeded in getting into my mind in that way, what would you have made me do?”
Daenerys asks. She seems relatively calm for someone who was just told an entity had tried to
entirely invade and control her.

She asks, but she seems to know. She answers her own question before he can.

“Burn down King’s Landing? Like you tried to tell Jon I did. Like you told Sansa,” she realizes.

“Yes. It never occurred to me that I wouldn’t succeed. I had been testing your mental resilience all
the time you were at Dragonstone; it was at an all-time low by the time you took to the sky. It should
have been easy—at least, as easy as it could be. You’re not an easy one to control.”

Daenerys’s hand goes to the spot her head wound had been. She doesn’t say anything else. Jon does,
though.

“And what was next?” Jon demands. “You have her burn King’s Landing and all its innocents—
then what?”

“You know the answer to this one, Jon,” the Three-Eyed Raven tsks. “You can answer it yourself.”

The words fall dead from his lips, lifeless and empty. “I kill her. Somehow, I’m convinced to kill
her.”

“Yes. I had everything in line to have her turn on Tyrion Lannister, which would make Tyrion turn
on her, which would make him do what he does best— talk and manipulate. In your weakened state,
your surety giving way to uncertainty, I would have room to come in and influence you.” There’s a
short pause. He meets Jon’s eyes. “I never planned to fully take you over as I’d planned to do to her.
With how easily you turned against her and betrayed her trust in Winterfell— how quick you were to
push her away—I didn’t think I’d even need to control your mind to make you do it, just plant a few
suspicions, a few emotions. How quick blood is to turn on one another—especially your blood.”

“And now?” Jon asks.

The Three-Eyed Raven turns his head to the side again, thoughtful. Arya wonders how something
some innocuous can make her so uneasy.

“Now I understand I’ll have to try in other ways.”

That comment weighs on them all, sinister and threatening. Daenerys is the one who breaks the
silence.

“What comes next? Jon murders me and our child—then what? Surely you don’t want Jon on the
Throne?”

“No,” the Three-Eyed Raven answers. “He wouldn’t be on the Throne. That was never the plan. I
told Sansa Stark that, yes, but only because I knew, if I wanted to manipulate her against you both, it
had to be painted pretty. She had to feel righteous, as if she were doing some important thing for the
greater good of not only the kingdom, but her family, and herself. So I told her Daenerys would go
mad, you would be on the Throne, Jon, and that you would make her Queen in the North. What she
wanted to hear. What she prayed for nightly. But you were never going to be. If you destroyed
Daenerys, you’d also destroy yourself. You’d be sent to the Wall—sent by your very own family, as
I intended it. Not the first Targaryen it’s happened to. No, you wouldn’t rule. I would rule. I will.”
Nobody knows how to respond to that. Strangely, when Arya looks over at the king and queen, she thinks they might laugh for a moment.

“Do you take us for fools?” Daenerys finally demands. She turns to look back at the maester. “I thought you said this poison would last the hour?”

His voice drifts their way from outside the cell. “It should. And it’s five times as powerful as what people normally get.”

Daenerys turns back around, pinning the Three-Eyed Raven with a fierce stare.

“You on the Throne. Why? What does the Three-Eyed Raven care about a Throne?”

He blinks at her. “What do you care about the Throne?”

“I’m on the Throne to take care of my people. To rule over them with justice and compassion,” she answers. “It’s my birthright.”

“In this, and in many other ways, Daenerys Targaryen, you and I are alike. Your answer, as pretty as it was, comes down to one thing: to rule. You are on the Throne to rule. That is what I will do.”

Daenerys leans forward in her seat, staring intently at the Three-Eyed Raven. “And what sort of king do you intend to be, Bran?”

He regards Daenerys with disgust. “I’m no more Bran Stark than I am that kitchen girl lying dull in her bed.”

Arya feels as if Daenerys is catching onto something they aren’t: she is watching every shift of the Three-Eyed Raven’s expression with a calculating gaze, and her next question is odd to Arya. Arya’s next question would have been about why he’d chosen Bran, why he’d been inside Bran for so long. But Daenerys’ mind is elsewhere.

“Then what shall I call you? I intend to talk with you until I understand, so I should have something to call you in the meantime. Do you have a name? Have you ever? You must have, at one point.”

“A long time ago now,” he says. He looks away from Daenerys’s eyes and looks up, casting his gaze out of one of the many holes in the ceiling. “I had a mother once, a name. A love. Power. A place. And then, all at once, nothing. Blood turned on blood, and I turned inside myself.”

Arya’s as surprised as everybody else when it’s her voice that breaks the silence.

“Love can be the most frightening thing,” she says, echoing Grey Worm’s earlier words. She feels his gaze on the profile of her face, but she stares determinately at the Three-Eyed Raven. If it’s true that love is fear—and therefore weakness—she thinks this is a good place to begin cleaving at answers.

“Frightening? No,” he says, and his laugh feels sharp. “I had no fear. A thousand eyes and one I had, even then—what do you fear when you can see everything? No. Love was not fear. Love was bitter disgust, furious disappointment.” He looks at Jon. Despite how much it appears to pain him, he can’t stop the words flowing from his lips. “I was you once. In bed with a woman I craved more than anything—food, water, air, anything. Beautiful, she was. Her hair, like hers.” He turns a quick, spiteful glare on Daenerys before looking back at Jon. “Shining silver, soft as silk. Her eyes, one green and one blue, the duality of the sea. And she took me into her bed—quite like you—and do you know what she did next? Every time?”
Arya does. Because she’s done it. “She cast you out. She denied your proposals. I imagine there were many.”

“I wasn’t enough for her. That’s another way we’ll end up alike, Jon.”

His attempts at sowing discord between the king and queen fall flat. Arya doesn’t see even a flash of concern on her brother’s face, nor any sort of uncertainty on the queen’s.

“Is that what this is, then? Revenge on your long-lost love? Who was it? Queen Rhaella?” Jon demands. “You seemed to pay her special mind when you were tormenting me with those visions.”

The Three-Eyed Raven laughs at that as if it’s utterly absurd. “Rhaella Targaryen? Is that the loveliest Targaryen you can think of? Rhaella Targaryen was nothing—a bore of a woman, dull in comparison. No, my sister outshone Queen Rhaella in every way.”

Sister, Arya thinks, resisting the urge to make a face. She automatically begins trying to recount what she learned of the Targaryen lineage during her multitude of history lessons with Septa Mordane, but as far as she can recall, Daenerys (and Jon) are the only ones who are still alive, who could even possibly still be alive. She looks at Daenerys to see how she’s taken that comment. She’s sitting up straighter now, her hand falling to rest on her stomach. Arya can tell she’s thinking from the slight furrow to her brow.

“A thousand eyes, and one,” Daenerys finally repeats, her tone thoughtful. The Three-Eyed Raven’s eyes snap to hers. “Forgive me—I hear my brother Rhaegar possessed a beautiful voice, but I fear I never shared that particular talent. But I wonder...” she trails off, and when she begins singing a vaguely familiar song, Arya’s inclined to disagree that she doesn’t share Rhaegar Targaryen’s knack for singing. As beautiful as the song sounds, she can’t help but feel chilled as the lyrics reverberate around the cell. It returns to Arya quickly—Lord Bloodraven. Bran in particular had been interested in him: one of the only times he was fully enthralled in lessons was when they were talking of him. Jon, Arya remembered, had been far more interested in Daeron the Young Dragon, and she Visenya, so her knowledge felt faraway and eroded by time. She did recall, though, that he had been involved in something like blood magic.

Not for the first time, she wishes Bran would return to them. The real Bran. He would’ve known about Bloodraven. Arya’s sure of it.

The singing panders off. When Arya looks at Jon, she sees it’s clicked for him, too: he’s holding Daenerys’s shoulder tightly, as if he’s more frightened now than he’d been before.

“I ask for one more pardon,” Daenerys continues, her voice softer now. “I never did have a formal education, so it’s possible my self-learned facts are wrong. But Lord Bloodraven...he lived and died over a lifetime ago. He was sent to the Wall when Aegon the Unlikely rose to power. My grandfather.”

“Your facts are wrong,” the Three-Eyed Raven (Bloodraven?) says coldly. “Your grandfather rose to power because of Lord Bloodraven. And he did not die at the Wall. He took his power and his might, and he twisted it inward—he became something else. Something greater. Not alone, either.”

Daenerys rubs over her stomach for a moment. Arya wonders if something is wrong, but she doesn’t appear to be in pain.

“And this is...revenge? Because my grandfather exiled you?” Daenerys’s hand falls to her lap. “A thousand eyes, and one—all that power and you’re chasing after a baby out of revenge. I’d think you were above that.”
Cold pity— that’s all Daenerys gives the Three-Eyed Raven. Not a stitch of fear. Arya loves her fiercely for it.

“I’m not here for revenge, you stupid girl,” the Three-Eyed Raven scowls. “I am here to dispose of you, him, and her.”

“To rule,” Daenerys adds, her disgust audible in her tone.

“In part. We all answer to the sources of our own power— you and your dragon answer to R’hllor whether you know it or not. I answer to something greater. I was given my strength so that I may rule here in his name, a strength another agent tried to usurp… but you saw to that, Arya Stark.”

The Three-Eyed Raven meets Arya’s eyes. She stares back, confused for a few seconds. And then it sinks in. She turns, gaping, to Jon. His expression is twisted.

“The Night King wanted to kill and enslave every living man, woman, and child,” Jon says fiercely.

“You’re already enslaved. You are born here and die here in hell. The Night King was nothing more than a greedy, squabbling brother, trying to assert himself over me and impress Our Great One. He had his own ideas of the way things needed to be done here, the best way to herald the darkness. He had his own reasons for choosing those ways, too. And I have my ways… my reasons. Now that he’s gone, it’s time for me to claim my birthright. And the only thing standing in my way is you three.”

Daenerys, Jon, the baby. Arya turns to find Grey Worm’s eyes. She sees, reflected there, the same panic she’s beginning to feel. This is much bigger than she expected it to be. It’s a threat that has no name.

“Tell me, Brynden Rivers,” Daenerys says. Arya looks back at the Three-Eyed Raven, curious to see if he answers to that. He doesn’t appear to like Daenerys using that name: his look of hatred is cutting. “Who is the one who was promised?”

He doesn’t like that question any more than he liked being called Brynden Rivers. Arya watches in morbid fascination as his face contorts from the effort of trying not to answer, trying to control the inhibitions the poison has weakened. He physically clamps his hand over his own mouth, the internal war obvious and painful.

“Hm,” Daenerys hums thoughtfully. “I thought as much. It’s not me. It’s not Jon. It’s her.”

Her hand strokes over her stomach pointedly. Lovingly. She leans forward; there’s power radiating off her now, and it frightens Arya. Because danger follows power.

“She’s why the priestess Melisandre insisted Jon and I must meet. She’s why you want me dead. She’s who you’re trying to destroy. Because she’s going to destroy you.”

If ever a mother has spoken of her child with such pride, Arya has never heard it. Daenerys’ other hand joins her first, holding her stomach, brimming with some emotion Arya could only describe as honor.

“She won’t,” the Three-Eyed Raven snarls, and then he rears his head forward and spits in Daenerys’s face, overcome with rage. Arya hears herself make a guttural sound not unlike a growl; both she and Grey Worm lunge forward, Needle already drawn, but Daenerys throws a hand out, signaling them to stop. Arya reluctantly edges away only after Grey Worm does, though her heart is pounding in anger, and both she and Grey Worm do not let go of their weapons.

The Three-Eyed Raven looks smug. Daenerys doesn’t so much as budge beyond closing her eyes.
briefly in disgust. Jon reaches out and gently wipes the spit from Daenerys’s cheek, staring coldly at the Three-Eyed Raven afterwards. Arya notices his hand is on Longclaw again.

“She will,” Daenerys says. “You’ve failed time and time again. You tried to cause my downfall, and you failed. I suppose, in some strange way, I have Cersei Lannister to thank for that. You tried to get into Jon’s brain, to make him turn on me, and you failed there, too. You tried to get me to destroy myself, and you might have succeed, only you underestimated the people in my life. The people who love me. The people I love so fiercely I won’t name it love— love isn’t big enough for it.”

Daenerys looks at Jon, at Grey Worm, at Arya. Arya’s heart lurches when Daenerys’s violet eyes meet hers, fierce with pride and affection. Warmth wrap around her heart at the sight.

Daenerys turns back to the Three-Eyed Raven. “You tried again today. I doubt you truly believed I’d drink enough of that tea to kill her, did you? No, you wanted to make me afraid again. You couldn’t get into my head anymore, so you had to find another way to make me paranoid and petrified. Another way to get me to do your evil work for you. I won’t. You’re weak— I see that now. You can’t stay out of Bran’s body for longer than you did, that’s why you came back to it. If I burn this body, you’ll float around for a few days, and then you’ll disappear forever like smoke in the night. The Night King, at least, went out fighting.”

Again, Arya sees that teetering balance of power and danger. The more forceful and confident the queen becomes, the more on edge Arya feels. She knows the Three-Eyed Raven won’t have any choice but to match Daenerys in strength.

“I didn’t come back to this body because I had to,” the Three-Eyed Raven says. “I came back because I wanted to.”

“I doubt that very much,” Daenerys counters. “Bran’s trapped here. You know there’s no way out of this inside his body. Why come back to it? Why choose Bran Stark at all?”

“I think you know the answer to that,” the Three-Eyed Raven says. “It had to be Bran. It always had to be Bran. I’ve always known who I had to get to in the end.” He leans in as much as he can; Arya tightens her fist around Needle, but Daenerys remains out of reach. “If you come closer, I’ll give you the answer to something else. Something you’ve always wondered all your life.”

“Hmm,” Daenerys hums thoughtfully again. “I think not. I can hear you just fine from where I am.”

The Three-Eyed Raven smiles thoughtfully again. “I think not. I can hear you just fine from where I am.”

As it spreads over his face, his eyes seem to get darker— harder to focus on. Faraway.

And at first, Arya thinks Jon looks so pained because he’s worried. But when he suddenly doubles over with a sharp inhalation, she realizes it’s something else.

Daenerys rises at once, her hands resting helplessly on Jon’s back. She turns to look at the Three-Eyed Raven furiously.

“Put him back asleep!” she orders Grey Worm.

“So soon? But we haven’t finished talking yet,” the Three-Eyed Raven says. “There’s so much more to know, Daenerys.”

Jon is groaning now, sinking further to the floor. Arya looks at Grey Worm, trusting his spear to do a better job knocking the Three-Eyed Raven unconscious than Needle, but the Three-Eyed Raven’s words stop them.
“I wouldn’t, if I were you,” he says. “If you knock me out while I’m in his head, what do you imagine happens? Do you think I’ll stay there forever?”

Grey Worm looks to Daenerys, but she’s stooped at Jon’s side, her hands cradling his face as he gasps in pain that seems to be increasing.

“I’ve only ever fully entered the minds of two human beings thus far, and both were left incapacitated afterwards. I wonder, when I finally get into Jon’s mind, what will be left afterwards? Yes, yes, it’s agony—terrible agony.” The Three-Eyed Raven tsks. “He loves you so fiercely, Queen Daenerys. He’s a fool. His worry for you is so great it makes this easier than ever.”

Jon falls to his knees, and Daenerys falls down beside him, her face horrified, her hands hovering uselessly over Jon’s body as if she’s searching for a wound to apply pressure to, an injury to soothe.


“There is no safe answer,” Grey Worm tells her, appearing equally panicked. “But doing nothing is worse.” He lifts his spear; Arya guesses he’s chosen his interpretation of the best answer of all the terrible ones.

But when they both turn back to face the Three-Eyed Raven, they’re horrified to see the queen perched on his bed, her hands clenched around his. She speaks quickly in Valyrian, desperately; Arya looks up at Grey Worm to try and gauge what she’s saying, but beyond a troubled look, she can’t gather much. It matters not: it’s fairly obvious from the queen’s tone that she’s pleading.

At the bedside, crumbled on the floor, Jon is at war with something they can’t see. The struggle, Arya can tell, is immense.

At once, Jon falls limp, and the Three-Eyed Raven’s brow smoothes out. Arya’s heart stops and she feels vomit spasm up her throat at the sight of Jon’s still form, thinking he’s dead, but after a couple seconds, he presses his hands to the floor and pushes himself upright shakily.

Daenerys turns to flee back to his side, but before she can, the Three-Eyed Raven reaches out, seizing a handful of her silver hair. It’s falling loose down her back in waves today--a mistake. Daenerys cries out, automatically retreating towards the Three-Eyed Raven at the pressure; he yanks violently, dragging her back, and Grey Worm has the point of his spear to his throat in what seems like half the time it takes to blink.

“RELEASE HER!”

Arya has never heard him raise his voice before. It booms through the cell; Arya is certain the people in the courtyard must hear it. Even they must know Grey Worm has every intention of digging his spear into the Three-Eyed Raven’s throat.

“But do it,” the Three-Eyed Raven says indifferently, his hand tightening in her hair. Her eyes shut with pain. “I have outgrown this body.”

Daenerys tries to shake her head at Grey Worm but can’t manage it with how hard her hair is being grasped. The attempt clearly draws Grey Worm up short. He doesn’t lower his spear, but he doesn’t pierce him through, either.

The queen’s next cry is involuntary. Arya is sure he’s tearing hair right from her scalp. And from the corner of Arya’s eye, she sees Jon’s quivering hand pressing to the bed frame as he struggles to stand. Arya hurries over to him. She kneels beside him and grabs his arm, pulling it over her
shoulders. She wraps her other arm around his waist and digs her fingers into his side for purchase as she slowly stands, hauling him up with her.

When she looks back at the Three-Eyed Raven, he’s pulled Daenerys’s head down so her ear is above his lips. His free hand, Arya sees, is splayed over her belly, nails biting into the raspberry-colored silk of her dress. When he hisses to her, it’s so quiet in the room that they can all make out every word.

“I’m going to go now,” he says. “I think, in time, you’ll thank me for this.”

Arya doesn’t know what he’s planning to do to her, but Daenerys reacts as if he’s holding a knife to her belly. She tears viciously at the backs of his hands with her nails, peeling entire layers of skin away as easily as a knife peels an apple, squirming against his hold. Jon pushes off Arya’s supporting frame, lurching forward and then stumbling against the mattress. His shaking hands grasp at the Three-Eyed Raven’s useless ankles; he tugs so hard that the Three-Eyed Raven is yanked halfway down the bed. The Three-Eyed Raven’s nails scrape at Daenerys’s stomach as he’s pulled away, though he still doesn’t let go of her hair. She’s half-dragged down with him. She twists her body at once, putting her torso as far from him as possible; Grey Worm steps in front of her, and Arya jumps in the tangle, grasping at the slippery, bloody hand in Daenerys’s hair. She remembers suddenly all the times she’d had to pry Sansa’s hand out of her own hair when they were little. She wiggles her fingers between the Three-Eyed Raven’s thumb and forefinger, struggling to unclench his grip. She can’t seem to get purchase with all the blood soaking Daenerys’s hair and his hand; she doesn’t even know if the blood is Daenerys’s or the Three-Eyed Raven’s, though she assumes it’s a mixture. Jon, she realizes with a thrill of shock, has his thumbs over the Three-Eyed Raven’s eyes, pressing so hard his thumbnails turn white from the pressure, and the Three-Eyed Raven begins howling.

“Let go! LET GO!” Jon bellows.

His hands move to the Three-Eyed Raven’s throat as soon as it’s exposed enough to grasp. Arya leans closer to where the Three-Eyed Raven’s hand is clenching Daenerys’s hair, trying to get a better look at where to pull, but her head collides painfully with Daenerys’s when he gives another sudden tug on her hair. They collide hard enough that Arya sees stars behind her eyes, and pain races like a lightning bolt all the way to her toes, but she doesn’t let go, doesn’t stop pulling at his fingers. If it weren’t so close to Daenerys’s head, she’d chop his hand off, but she knows there’s no way she’d manage without hurting somebody else in the process.

Finally, the Three-Eyed Raven’s fingers let up, growing weak from lack of oxygen. His hand falls limp to the mattress, blood-soaked, several pieces of Daenerys’s hair twisted around his fingers like fine, silver threads. Arya leaps forward and shoves her knee into the Three-Eyed Raven’s chest, forcing him onto his back. She sits on his stomach, shoving his shoulders back onto the bed, but he’s given up his fight completely, Jon’s hands still locked in a death-grip around his throat.

“Jon,” Arya says. She’s panting. Her vision is a bit black at the edges, and her head throbs where she and Daenerys collided. “Jon, let go, he’s stopped. Jon. Jon, let go!”

When he doesn’t— and Arya sees Bran’s lips turning blue— she reaches in and pries at his fingers, trying to force his hands off. He only squeezes harder. He doesn’t let up until they hear two things: a distant roaring in the sky above and a low, almost-silent growl.

Jon releases the Three-Eyed Raven’s throat. Arya turns and watches Ghost sidle into the cell, red eyes as wild as Jon’s are.

“I’ll let Ghost have you,” Jon snarls. “Here he is. And Drogon, too. You’ve hurt his mother. He
wont’t like that.” He spits in the Three-Eyed Raven’s face, unhinged, and then he climbs unsteadily off the bed, going over to sit by Daenerys at the other end. He wraps her into his arms, murmuring something Arya can’t decipher. Arya sees Daenerys massaging her scalp with a grimace, her hair ruby with blood.

Arya thinks (hopes) that Drogon won’t set flame to the cell with his mother inside of it, but going by the way he’s roaring above them, she’s not certain. She thinks it’s time to go. She looks over at Grey Worm, nodding his way, and he comes over and presses the spear to the Three Eyed Raven’s throat once more so Arya can stop restraining him.

The Three-Eyed Raven should be frightened. Ghost, sitting in front of Jon and Daenerys, is watching him with his lips curled back, fangs bared. Drogon sounds so upset Arya thinks he may burn the cells down the moment his mother walks from them.

But the Three-Eyed Raven is smiling. He’s not worried at all. Something has changed, but Arya isn't sure what.

“A mother you’ve fashioned yourself, a mother you’ve longed to be,” he says. “And you never will be.”

Daenerys is still kneading over her scalp as she looks over at him. The Three-Eyed Raven relaxes back against the mattress, turning his eyes up to the ceiling. His eyes follow Drogon’s movement in the sky as he flies low above the broken ceiling, a dark shadow blocking out the sun every few seconds.

“As long as you are with your child, so are my thousand and one eyes. That is what you give to her.”

When he goes limp, his body seems to sigh into the mattress. Arya watches in horror as the acrid smile on his face gradually disappears.

As before, she doesn’t have to be told a thing. She can tell when the Three-Eyed Raven is gone from her brother. She can tell when he’s Bran again.

But he’s not moving. He’s hardly breathing. Arya watches his chest for ten long seconds, hardly breathing herself. When she reaches out to grab Bran’s wrist, she feels the faintest of pulses.

Suddenly, she hears the metallic hiss of a sword being drawn. She turns. She finds herself looking at Jon, looming above them, his eyes on Bran, Longclaw held so tightly his fingers appear bone-white. Arya realizes, her heart plummeting, that he doesn’t see what she sees. He doesn’t understand that it’s too late, that the Three-Eyed Raven escaped.


“Move, Arya!””

“No! I won’t! Look at him! Look! The Three-Eyed Raven is gone—”

“MOVE!”

“NO! Daenerys!” Arya cries, turning to the queen, appealing for her to appeal to Jon. She’s got a hand resting lightly on her stomach, her lips twisted in discomfort; she hardly seems to process Jon and Longclaw, Bran supine beneath the blade. “Daenerys, it’s Bran again! Please! Trust me, please!”
Those words break through whatever Daenerys is currently fretting about. She sets a trembling hand on the headboard and eases herself up slowly, walking over to stand at Jon’s side. She sets her hand at his hip, pulling him closer to her.

“Let Ghost see,” she says.

Jon doesn’t move. His arms are shaking so erratically that Arya doubts he’d even be able to take Bran’s head in one clean strike; he’d end up hacking away unevenly, making Bran suffer needlessly.

"Jon," Daenerys begs. She touches his forearm gently. He turns to look at her, his face contorted with pain. Daenerys curls her fingers around his forearm, steadying him. He gradually lowers Longclaw.

"Ghost," he calls hoarsely.

Arya turns towards Ghost. They watch him creep up to Bran, lips still curled back in a snarl. He edges close to Bran’s face, sniffing hard, hackles raised.

Gradually, though, his body softens, like some great weight has been lifted from him. His body language morphs from tense and furious to relaxed. He nudges his nose against Bran’s arm once, twice, and then he turns to look up at Jon.

Arya hears Longclaw clatter to the floor. Jon— still extremely unstable from whatever happened to him— crumbles. He leans into Daenerys, his face pressing into her neck, his whole body quaking. Daenerys meets Arya’s eyes over top of Jon’s head, her fingers combing softly through his curls.

Her eyes are pained. Troubled.

It’s then that Arya understands this was not a victory.

IV.

Daenerys winces as the maester presses firmly on her stomach, only just managing to bite back an inhalation of pain. It matters not: she sees Jon, from where he’s pacing, turn towards the bed at once, his brow furrowed low over the grey storm of his eyes. He walks back over to stand anxiously by her side, his emotions rolling off him in waves.

“You’re supposed to be resting,” Arya tells Jon. She’s lying beside Daenerys on the bed, arms crossed and brow tense. She’d claimed she was tired, but Dany thinks she joined her simply because Jon wouldn’t. He’s been pacing since they entered the chambers, on edge and trembling.

“Don’t need it,” Jon dismisses, but he at least perches on the side of the bed.

His palm is rough and warm as his hand slides over hers. Dany turns her hand over, entwining her fingers with his. He holds tight, his anxiety churning in his eyes. From the foot of the bed, Ghost whimpers, his stress a mirror of Jon’s.

“Beyond the bruising, I think everything is fine,” the maester decides. “Babies are extremely protected in the womb. It would take a lot more than that to hurt it. He only squeezed, correct?”

"Yes," Arya affirms.

Daenerys rises up onto her elbows and looks down at her bared stomach. She eyes the bruising that’s already begun, splotches of deep reddish-purple from the pressure of the Three-Eyed Raven’s fingers.
“You're sure?” she asks, lifting her free hand to touch over one bruise experimentally. It’s very tender.

“Yes, Your Grace,” he assures.

She’d worry endlessly if it weren’t for the periodic nudges she’d been feeling from her daughter since they left the Black Cells. There didn’t seem to be anything different in her rate of movement, and Dany had to cling to that. She couldn’t even entertain the alternative.

Jon stands again and crosses to the balcony, his back to Dany. She wants to follow after him, but the maester parts her hair and begins to look at her scalp so she remains still. She looks at Arya though, nodding her head Jon’s way. Arya sighs, but she swings her legs over the side of the bed and rises anyway. Daenerys watches her join him at the balcony as the maester mops at her scalp with cleansing wine. She’s relieved to find it doesn’t sting much at all, indicating most of the blood matted in her hair hadn’t been hers.

“There’s hardly any damage here,” the maester tells her. “A small bleeding spot where your hair was wrenched out, but the skin is more-or-less intact. I don't understand how all this blood could have come from something so superficial...”

“It isn’t all my blood,” Daenerys comments, and for a moment, she feels the urge to smile.

At the balcony, Arya is talking quietly to Jon. She usually has him laughing in no time at all, but he doesn’t so much as quirk his lips. Dany’s heart feels like a void; the empty pressure of it makes her feel sick. She wants nothing more than to get out of that bed and go to him, but she’s suddenly worried that he’s upset with her.

The maester wipes the blood from her hair and scalp with a warm, moist cloth, gentle and quiet as he does. He presses a cool compress sprinkled with peppermint oil to it afterwards; it soothes the throbbing.

“Rest,” he urges her quietly, peering seriously into her eyes. “Physically, you will recover in short time, but trauma can destroy the body as quickly as injury can.”

She knows that well, but it’s not her she’s worried about this time. Her eyes seek Jon again. She stares at the tense hold of his shoulder, the way his head is bowed.

“I’d like essence of nightshade. Not enough to bring sleep, just enough to calm the nerves. Bring it up mixed in mead.”

The maester hesitates. “Ah, Your Grace, we do not recommend the consumption of it when you’re with child.”

“It’s not for me,” Dany explains.

He turns and glances Jon’s way. He nods.

“I'll send it up right away,” he says.

“Thank you.”

When the maester leaves, Dany pulls her dress back over her stomach and stands from the bed. Ghost leaps off, too, following her closely. She rests her hand on his back as they walk together.

She joins Arya and Jon on the balcony, moving to stand on Jon’s other side. She looks up at him.
Something, she knows, is eating at him, and she thinks he’s using all his strength to keep from losing it.

“I sent the maester for essence of nightshade. How is your head?” she asks him.

He bows his head again and clutches at the balcony railing. He doesn’t answer. Dany and Arya exchange a worried look.

Right when Dany thinks he’s unable or unwilling to talk, he does.

“How could you go to him, Dany?”


“What?” she demands of Jon, turning to face him incredulously.

“You’re angry with me,” Dany realizes. Even though she’d feared he might be, she hadn’t expected it. Not really. “For...?”

“For going to him! For getting close to him! When we knew what he tried to do the last time! When you knew that’s what he wanted— you knew he wanted you to come closer!” Jon rocks forward unsteady, tightening his grip on the railing, and for a moment, Dany’s afraid he’s going to fall over it. Arya must be, too, because she seizes a handful of his jerkin.

“Come sit. Now,” Arya orders irritably. “You’re not thinking straight. You’re being stupid, and you can barely stand. Sit until the maester brings the essence of nightshade.”

He shakes Arya’s hand off. When he turns to face Dany, she’s taken aback by the tears shining on his cheeks. She reaches for him instinctively, her hand setting on his cheek. He reaches up and catches her hand, and for a second, she thinks he might push it away. But he clutches it, swaying again on his feet.

“He was hurting you, Jon,” Dany reminds him. She grounds herself, refusing to let doubt creep up. “When have I ever sat by and let that happen when I could do something to stop it?”

Never. And she never would.

“It’s what he wanted, Dany, he wanted you close enough to touch, and now he’s done something and—” he breaks off, his words shattering in fear. Dany’s heart trembles unpleasantly in her chest. She feels the urge to cry finally set in. With it, doubts come. Had she done the right thing? “We don’t know what he did. But he did something.”

Dany doesn’t need Jon’s ominous words to know that. She had felt it. She had felt the chill race through her veins.

“What would you have me do?” Dany demands. She has to work to keep her voice from trembling. She chases Jon’s gaze as he drops his eyes, refusing to back down. “Let him pull your brain apart? Stand there and watch it happen? He could’ve killed you— you know it as well as I do. Better, I’d imagine, since you were the one feeling it.”

Jon digs his hands into his hair and pulls on it. He spins around, turning on Arya next.

“You should have just killed him and been done with it before she went over to him!”
Arya’s not standing for it. She draws herself up tall, her eyes cutting into Jon.

“Don’t you start on me!” Arya snaps, furious. “And don’t you dare start on her, either! I wanted to kill him from the first moment he was in that cell and you told me I couldn’t! We all did the best we could just now! It’s nobody’s fault what happened! Now you stop being a bloody, stubborn arse and —go—sit—down!”

Arya struggles, her hands against Jon’s back, trying to push him towards the bench. Dany steps past them and walks slowly over to it, sinking down onto it herself. Ghost sits at her feet. Like Dany had hoped, Jon relents then, walking over to sit beside her.

As soon as he allows himself to sit and relax, he collapses. Arya watches on in horror as he begins crying, but it’s nothing Dany hasn’t seen.

Their disagreement evaporates as soon as she reaches for him. She’d gone to hold him, but it turns out he wants to hold her. Dany doesn’t mind. As he cradles her to his chest and presses his face into her hair, she feels her own fear and sorrow work its way up her throat. It’s a dry, widening ache.

“I’m sorry,” he breathes into her hair, words choked with regret. “I’m sorry, Dany.”

She senses he’s not just apologizing for being frustrated with her. She thinks she knows what he is apologizing for, and it only makes her more upset.

“No one could’ve withstood that,” she whispers. “No one. It’s not your fault. You heard what he said. The past two people he’d tried to get into like that lost their minds completely.”

He doesn’t press the matter, but Dany can tell he feels like it’s his fault— like he had been a weapon against her. In a way, she guesses he had been. The Three-Eyed Raven knew, if he threatened Jon’s life, Dany would do something to save him. Anything to save him. She was, if nothing else, consistent in that.

She lets a few tears fall from her eyes and seep into Jon’s tunic. She’d hoped that would help the pressure on her heart, but it only seems to bring it closer to the surface. She turns her face to the side for fresh air, and when she opens her eyes, her gaze falls on Arya.

Arya, standing there alone, certainly as traumatized as they are. Daenerys thinks of the desperation in her voice as she begged for Bran’s life. Distantly, she remembers Viserys’s voice. Dany, please! Please!

Dany unwraps one of her arms from around Jon and reaches out towards Arya. She notices her own hand is trembling; she hadn’t even realized it until she saw it. Arya just looks at Dany’s hand for a few long moments. Dany wiggles her fingers imploringly. At that, Arya smiles just slightly, and that helps lessen the pressure laying like stones on Dany’s chest.

Arya walks over, taking Dany’s hand as soon as she’s close enough to. Dany pulls on it, bringing her in, and Jon moves to the side at once, making just enough room for Arya to perch between them. His arms go back around Dany— and now Arya, too. Dany slides her hand under Arya’s arm, wrapping it around her waist, holding her.

“What now?” Daenerys asks them.

Arya’s breath is warm against Dany’s hair. “We get you a sword of your very own.”

Dany laughs once. Jon does, too. Soon, they’re both laughing, and Arya joins in, though she’s quick to clarify.
“I’m serious,” Arya tells them. She pulls back and looks at Dany. “If he really went…elsewhere, he could be anywhere. Which means you’ve got to be prepared to meet him anywhere, anytime.”

Daenerys tries to imagine walking around with both a pregnant stomach and a sword as big as Longclaw at her hip. Even the thought makes her tired.

“What about a dagger?” she suggests.

“Sure,” Arya relents. “A dagger is better than nothing.”

Daenerys feels Jon’s hand move to her lower back, caressing over her spine. When she looks up at him, she reads his weariness easily.

“I think we should all rest,” Dany decides. A horrible thought occurs to her; she sighs. “Someone needs to update Lord Tyrion and Ser Davos. In fact, I think they may still be waiting for us in the council room…”

“I’ll go,” Arya offers, though Dany can tell that’s an offer born from love and nothing but. It’s not a desirable chore at all. “Though I can’t promise I’ll be polite to Tyrion Lannister.”

“I would never expect the unreasonable.”

“Do you want me to tell them everything?” Arya asks.

Dany looks up at Jon. Maybe he’s just tired, but he nods at once, and Dany’s feeling a similar way. She hasn’t even come close to processing all the information she’d found out today, all the fear; she has no energy left to worry that their advisors aren’t true.

“Yes, as much as you can remember.”

“I’m not soon to forget any of it,” Arya mutters, standing to leave.

Unfortunately, Daenerys thinks that’s undoubtedly true for all of them.

V.

They heal like this: skin to skin, the heat of the flames enveloping them, the peaceful crackling of the fire lulling their fearful thoughts towards peace.

They sit leaning against each other, their skin washed of the blood and sweat of the day, the heat from the fireplace drying their wet hair. Dany rests her head against his shoulder and watches the orange movement of the flames from behind her closed eyelids. His hand, steadier now than it’d been in hours, strokes her thigh, his head resting gently against the top of hers.

“The princess who was promised,” Dany murmurs, tasting the words. Giving birth to them and the heavy implications embedded there.

She sets her hand over their daughter as she moves within her. How was it that she hadn’t even taken a breath and she was already hunted? Already in danger?

Though, hadn’t it been that way for her and Jon, too? She supposes she’s a fool for expecting better for her child. For hoping it.

“No,” Jon says, his voice firm, heavy. He turns. Dany lifts her head from his shoulder and opens her eyes, taking in his intent gaze. He holds her chin gently and kisses her lips; it’s a balm to her sore heart. “A princess, yes. But before she’s anything, she’s our daughter. They can’t take that from us.”
Dany thinks about the words Jon had given her during their bath the hour prior. “I’ve never been so frightened,” he’d said, speaking of the moments Bran was forcing his way into his head while Dany cried out in the background. It was like blackness that held every noise and sight. I saw nothing yet everything. I heard a thousand different sounds— yet I could still hear your gasp of pain. I felt like someone had buried an ax into my skull and turned the blade sideways, prying the two halves open. Dany had felt the sting of every word. And when he admitted, at the end of that: But I was scared senseless when I saw you holding your middle. When I realized what he thinks our child is. What she’ll never be able to escape.

She’s scared, too. She couldn’t let herself show it to the Three-Eyed Raven, but the thought that her child might be doomed to the sort of life she’s had paralyzes her with a sense of helplessness. She wants to raise her child in the soft comfort of a home, unaware of outside evils that might seek to destroy her, her only worries about what games she might play or what stories she might read. *Maybe,* Dany has even thought a few times, when she’s feeling particularly happy and hopeful, *she even could laugh and explore the world with a brother or a sister.*

Could she give her child that now? Could she give her all she never had?

She doesn’t know what shows on her face as she rests her hand on her stomach, but whatever it is causes Jon to hold her face with the gentlest of touches and kiss her so softly that her lips chase his afterwards, seeking more. He has a way of making her feel like spun gold in his hands, priceless and precious. Cherished. She has never felt that way under anyone else’s touch.

“I want to know her name,” Jon murmurs between kisses, his hand stroking the side of her stomach. “What will we call her?”

She knows it’s his way of trying to give their daughter an identity of her own, something beyond the princess who was promised. Dany runs her nose against the side of Jon’s as she breaks their lips apart, her heart rising in her chest at the thought. Somehow, it’s just the right thing to say. She wouldn’t have even known to say it if she were to try to tell him how to make her feel better. But he had known.

“I don’t know,” Dany admits. “Rhaella, I think, sometimes. Viserys always spoke of her like she was love given form. Other times, Lyanna. My brother loved her so deeply…she’s said to have been a remarkable woman. And it’s a Northern name; I think the North would quite like your heir to be Lyanna.” It seemed fitting in a way, too, that Lyanna Stark would inadvertently cause the divide in the kingdoms, only for another Lyanna to mend it. By now, most of noble birth knew of Jon’s true identity and the true story of Rhaegar and Lyanna, but perhaps this would be a way to further prove the true narrative— further show that north and south are united.

Yet neither she nor Jon would exist if it weren’t for Rhaella and the suffering she had endured. At times, the memory of Rhaella was the only thing powerful enough to bring light into Viserys, the only source of peace for his soul. Dany knows she had been loved by Rhaella, from the time she first stirred in her womb to the moment her life cost her mother hers. She had never doubted it.

Her heart cannot settle on either.

“And then, at times, I worry…I named Rhaegal and Viserion after my brothers, and they are gone like them now, too. Rhaego was after both Rhaegar and Drogo, and they’re gone. Our mothers suffered, and then they died. I can't help but fear we'd be passing that suffering onto our daughter somehow.”

“Yes, our mothers suffered,” Jon agrees. Her eyes flutter shut as he kisses just beneath her ear. “But before the suffering, before the death, they lived. I wouldn’t want to be remembered by the things I
suffered. Your mother would want to be remembered as a mother so loving her son spoke of her daily after her death, my mother as a woman so willful her brother told stories of her to all his children more times than they can recall. Those are the things we pass on.”

Daenerys smiles. She pulls her fingers through his hair as he kisses her throat, feeling warm with love from the point his lips touch down to her toes.

“How do you approve of Lyanna?” she guesses.

“I approve of both. I like anything. I like what you think fits her.”

“Helpful,” Dany jests.

He looks up at her, suddenly serious, his palm finding her stomach again. “What if we just called her something, just you and I? Until we decide on a true name.”

Dany likes the idea of that. To her, it further sets the idea that they are a family, their own unit of three, the last Targaryens. The three heads of the dragon.

“I quite like that idea,” she admits. “What shall we call her?”

“Oh,” Jon says, his grin suddenly cheeky, “I don’t know, I didn’t get that far.”

Dany laughs. “So we’re back where we started.”

“Not even close,” he refutes. She understands what he means as he kisses her lips again. She can’t help but melt a bit.

She thinks of many different things as he holds her, the thoughts rousing lazily and then scrambling at the touch of his lips to her skin or his whispers into her hair. She thinks of his fierceness, the way his eyes go hard when he’s protecting others. And she thinks of his softness, the way he holds her face as if it’s spun-gold, the way he whispers “I love you.” It’s the Valyrian “I love you” she thinks of then, the pronunciation tiled and warped by his Northern accent; somehow, it sounds better for it.

“Zaldrīzes-zokla,” she teases softly, and she’s pleased when he laughs.

“Īlva tala,” he says, the words awkward on his tongue but brimming with love. She’s surprised he remembers the word for daughter. It sets her heart aflame. “Our daughter.”


His softness could tear her heart apart. That’s what she thinks as he strokes her stomach, his nose bumping hers gently, his lips a breath away.

“Īlvon,” he affirms, approves.

“I prefer zaldrīzes-zokla.”

“You do not,” he refutes, laughing. His lips are still curved in a wide smile as he kisses her, and Dany feels their baby— “Īlvon,” she thinks, her heart swelling— shift within her, the movement strong enough she thinks Jon can probably feel it. The way his fingers tense for a moment affirms that.

“She agrees with me,” he says.

Their laughter mingles together, and as he pulls her into his lap, she thinks to herself: “I’m not alone anymore. This is family. This is what people fight for— this was the point of it all. This is what I
fought for so long, what I looked for so long. How could it come to me finally only to go?

It can’t, she decides, and then, firmer: It won’t. Whatever their daughter is destined for, she and Jon will be at her side. The three heads of the dragon—the last blood of the dragon. She and Jon had fought and fought and fought, and they would fight on.

VI.

“What does that even mean?” Arya demands, irritated. “You’re not making any sense.”

Tyrion slams his goblet to the table. A bit of wine sloshes over the edges and lands on the multitude of papers strewn in front of him, but he hardly seems to notice. Dany watches him with cold disapproval as he lifts his goblet back up. Her patience with his drunkenness is wearing thin; were she not preoccupied with things much more pressing than his dishonorable conduct, she would have him choose between being locked up in a room for however long it takes him to dry out and detoxify or handing over his pin. As it stands, as obnoxious as his obsession with the prophecy has become, he was the only one who had realized the Three-Eyed Raven was the enemy the prophecy was referring to before the Three-Eyed Raven himself admitted it. Tyrion’s mind was what she’d chosen him for; she’d have to wait and see how useful that mind could still be while soaked in wine.

“In short summary: we’re fucked, we are fucked, we are thoroughly, utterly well-fucked!” Tyrion slurs.

Ser Davos leans back in his chair and crosses his arms. “Well, there you have it, Arya. We’ve all been fucked.”

“Just now? I hardly felt it,” Arya comments, feigning surprise. “Did you feel it, Your Grace?”

“No,” Daenerys says. She sips from her own goblet, though she’s been favoring pomegranate juice over wine. “Not a thing.”

“Then we can’t have been well-fucked,” Arya says.

“Arya,” Jon scolds, visibly scandalized.

Daenerys hides her smile into her goblet. Tyrion scoffs.

“Oh, yes, very well— laugh! I cannot imagine what is funny about this— any of this! We should all be lying awake all night long in terror, but here we are, listening to Lady Stark make light of our situation with sex jokes!”

“She didn’t mean it that way,” Jon defends at once, scowling, though Dany can’t imagine what other way she would have meant it. Jon seems determined to defend her honor despite.

“Yes, sure, and she and Lord Gendry were playing Cyvasse at odd hours last time he was here—”

“Say another word and I’ll have you removed from the council room until you can mind your tongue,” Jon growls.

Tyrion glowers darkly as he refills his goblet. Silence falls over the room, broken by Arya.

“I am a formidable Cyvasse opponent.”

Ser Davos rubs over his forehead wearily, and Daenerys and Arya exchange an amused look. Dany has to look to the side and press her lips together to keep from laughing aloud.
“Can we please take this matter seriously?” Tyrion pleads.

“We take this matter extremely seriously,” Ser Davos tells Lord Tyrion. “Only, you’re upset over a book, and we’ve all just had our first bit of good news in a fortnight. Are you expecting us to weep?”

“Bran waking may not be wholly good news,” Lord Tyrion reminds them. “We still don’t know—”

“Of course it’s good news!” Arya interrupts, her anger lighting as quickly as Daenerys had expected it might. “A week he was lying in that bed wasting away, half-dead before he’d even take water, and the past week he’s hardly been any better-- him waking and speaking is beyond good news!”

Of course, he hadn’t said much. According to the maesters who sat with him day in and day out, he’d asked for Jon repeatedly this morning before falling back into a deep sleep. It was the first sign of genuine consciousness they’d seen. He’d been entirely unconscious for a week before he showed any type of progress, and even then it was only to suck water from strips of fabric and swallow it. He’d shown no signs of life beyond that. Him speaking, and remembering the name of someone on top of it, was a huge improvement— even for such a small one. It clearly didn’t impress Tyrion, though.

“If we’re even certain it’s really him.”

“You can’t have it both ways, Tyrion,” Jon protests. “Either the Three-Eyed Raven is loose in the world and plotting our downfall, or he’s trapped inside Bran. Which one?”

“It could be both. We won’t know for sure until the Priestess arrives. We should be cautious until then. And we should find someone to repair my book! The ink has run— I can barely read it anymore— I recorded things in that book, things we need to know!”

Daenerys meets Jon’s eyes from across the table. She reads his dry annoyance as easily as he reads hers. Tyrion has been in a state all morning; he said someone crept into his chambers and dropped one of his books into his chamberpot in the night, though everyone seems to think he had just been so drunk he hadn’t noticed it’d fallen in on its own and had pissed on it. Along with drinking practically nonstop, he’s spent the last two weeks doing one of three things: following Daenerys around worriedly, reading any and everything he can get his hands on, or obsessing over Daenerys’s translation of the letter from Volantis.

But to be fair, all of them have spent the past fortnight on edge. It’s left them all haggard. Grey Worm insists on personally standing over every kitchen girl who makes anything for Daenerys or Jon, going so far as to insist they taste or drink everything before they send it up; Arya has dedicated herself to teaching Daenerys how to properly wield the dagger she had Lord Gendry make for the queen, approaching the lessons with a solemnness she lacked during sword lessons, realizing now that this is truly necessary; both Jon and Daenerys refuse to be separated from one another to the point that they had a song written about them by a well-loved commonfolk entertainer entitled “Our Queen and King, Tied True”; Ghost relentlessly trails after Daenerys every moment of every day, only relenting to give her space when she and Jon are in bed, and even then he lies either on the balcony or at the door; Drogon is needier than usual and has taken to landing wherever he wants whenever he wants in search of her affection; Ser Davos has been pouring himself into all the duties of the kingdom with tireless zeal as means of distraction; and even Daenerys’s child has been moving much more often, the movements stronger and more restless than ever before.

With all the worry weighing on them— and on no one more than Dany and Jon— Sansa Stark’s arrival has fallen from their minds. What had once been Daenerys’s main concern is little more than a footnote to her passing thoughts, so that when Grey Worm comes to them right in the middle of Tyrion’s nonstop complaints about his book and announces that Lady Stark and her bannermen are
approaching King’s Landing, Daenerys can hardly find it in her to feel much of anything at all. She sets her hands on the arms of her chair and uses them to help herself rise, the ever-growing swell of her belly more cumbersome each day. Everyone stands as she does, including Jon, though he is standing to accompany her.

“I can bring her here,” Grey Worm offers at once.

“No, I would like to be there as she enters. I would like to witness it. These are my people, this is my kingdom: I should like to see her face as she meets it.”

For when it comes to her and Jon’s kingdom, Dany has nothing to hide, no shame. The growth of her child mirrors the growth of King’s Landing: they are both beautiful things that have never been before, and they are both getting better and stronger every day. She is so proud of it she knows it'll be impossible to hide that pride. If that upsets Lady Stark, well. Daenerys is no stranger to being the object of envy.

Arya, Grey Worm, Red Fly, and Blue Rat escort her and Jon towards the rebuilt city gates, Ghost following right at Dany’s side. The journey is long: Daenerys and Jon stop every few steps it seems, content to talk as long as they can with the adults and set eyes on the toys or books or drawings the children rush to show them. Daenerys doesn’t fear taking their hands or setting an arm on their shoulders, but she can’t fully hug them anymore simply because she can’t bear anyone but a select few so much as even grazing her stomach; on the occasion it does happen, her mind flashes back to the Three-Eyed Raven’s bruising grip a fortnight past, and her heart clenches in terror. It happens rarely now, though, as Ghost learned early to place himself between an approaching hand and her stomach. He never so much as growls or snaps, and certainly never hurts anyone— as the only people who would dare reach towards her that way are either children so small they know no better or weak-minded adults who think nothing of it— but his mere presence is enough.

When they make it to the gates, Daenerys sees that Sansa is traveling only with ten or so Winterfell bannermen. Jon, Dany, and Arya stand together just inside the gates and watch as they ride in, the Stark banners flying high. As Sansa draws closer, Dany’s initial thought is that she looks well. She wears her auburn hair pulled back, and her riding outfit is as sensible and nice as a lady could find. On her horse, she holds herself as tall as the Dothraki.

But when she dismounts from her horse and walks over to them— to Jon, Dany, and Arya, a unit now after all this time— there is little strength to be found in her eyes. It recedes with every step she takes towards them, and as she stops in front of their group, her eyes going from Jon, to Dany, to Dany’s stomach, to Arya, Daenerys finds herself thinking: she is completely alone. She is as alone as I once was. Perhaps more.

In the months prior, when Sansa was a bigger worry than Bran, she’d imagined she might allow herself a bit of gloating when she had the opportunity for it. Her frustration, hurt, and anger had made her bitter. She would think of Sansa’s treason— of the way she’d been treated whilst in Winterfell, whilst suffering some of the worst losses she had ever experienced— and she would burn. It was a vindictive fire. She could feed it with thoughts of that lonely feast after the fight against the dead, thoughts of Sansa’s cold looks and snide comments, thoughts of all the times she’d tried to turn Jon against her (tried to take the only person she had left). She could make it flare by remembering her and Sansa’s only conversation, when she had tried her hardest to open up and find common ground with Sansa, only to realize that effort was never going to be met in kind. She had been nothing but a tool to Sansa, never a person: good to take from, to use, but never considered a person with emotions or humanity, nor someone deserving the respect of compassion. And now, standing here with her family, feeling proud, strong, and blessed in so many ways despite everything
else, Dany has the opportunity to gloat and gloat well. She has the opportunity to make Sansa feel as alone as she had once made *her* feel. She has the opportunity to show Sansa Stark just how terrible Daenerys Stormborn can truly be.

But she doesn’t want to. She realizes it quickly, her hand settling on her stomach, her heart dropping bit by bit. She doesn’t want to.

She is no soft-hearted, stupid girl: she knows that if the roles were reversed, if the power switched hands, Sansa would likely ground her heart into the dirt. She knows, if it were her approaching Sansa’s domain, feeling cut-off from her own support system and abandoned by her family, that Sansa would leave her feeling worse than she’d felt before, more alone than she’d once been. She knows it because it had happened.

Yet she can’t bear the thought of being the hand that pushes down. Not when so many have pushed her down. *Those who have bent the knee will take the hand I’m offering, and I will lift them back up,* she had once said, and in that moment, she’s faced with the reassuring realization that she truly meant it. Being the Mad King’s daughter means a life of constant self-examination and self-doubt; any time she speaks, there is always a dark part of her that wonders whether she will be able to stand by the things that she's saying. It always feels like flying when she finds she's made of the same stuff she always believed herself to be made of.

Sansa doesn’t make a move to embrace Arya or Jon: she’s clearly waiting to see if they will do it. There is bad blood here between the Starks— Dany can feel it in the tension choking the air. But in some ways, Sansa’s blood resides in her, too: it’s in the veins of her child moving within her, in the veins of her lord husband. The blood of the wolf. Dany was coming to find it could be just as formidable as the blood of the dragon.

She lifts her palm off her stomach. Sansa’s eyes land on it at once. She extends her hand out towards Sansa, and for a second, she thinks Sansa may scowl. Her mouth tightens. Dany feels an intermixed rush of anger and hurt. She is about to pull her hand back when Sansa takes it stiffly, and without an ounce of emotion, presses her lips politely to the back of Dany’s.

“Your Grace,” she says.

Dany meets Sansa’s eyes, the miscommunication clear to her immediately. For a second, she tries to see herself in Sansa’s eyes, and she imagines, even without a crown, she demands a certain level of deference. But she hasn’t meant it that way: she hasn’t meant for her outstretched hand to be one of dominance. It would be gratuitous: there is no doubt that she is the one with the power. She doesn’t need that re-established.

It takes much more strength than Dany would like to admit to swallow her pride enough to tighten her hand on Sansa’s hand and pull gently.

“No,” she tells Sansa, drawing her over to her, Jon, and Arya. “Daenerys. We have much to talk about, Sansa. I’m happy you’re here.”

There are greater enemies bearing down on them than Sansa’s jealousy (a thousand eyes, and one.) Dany has little interest in giving a second more of her energy to this petty animosity. She cannot control how Sansa feels, but she can control how she feels. And she chooses freedom, always. Anger is just another set of chains.

“Come,” she says, still holding Sansa’s hand. “Dine with us. All the rest can wait.”

Jon is watching Sansa very carefully. Dany knows, if Sansa meets her with coldness now, Jon will
shut her out forever. That hardness will come to his eyes, the ferocity of the wolf— and the dragon. She has come to know it well.

Sansa is distrustful, but which of them aren’t? It’s something they will be unlearning for the rest of their lives.

“Thank you, I would enjoy dining after such a long journey,” she says. It’s stilted and awkward, but she smiles. She's trying. For now, that’s enough for Dany.

It’s not quite enough for Jon— he greets her but does not embrace her— but Arya sets her hand against Sansa’s arm briefly as they head back towards the Maidenvault.

They walk down newly-lain roads lined with newly-built homes, happy children giggling as they skip and play in the streets. They walk past sickhouses that bear the sterile smell of boiled wine and medicinal herbs, the windows thrown open, the pure-white curtains fluttering like dove’s wings in the warm breeze. They pass by all three of Daenerys’s scholarhouses, the doors propped open to reveal glimpses of happy adults and elders learning their way through books alongside well-fed children, the air sweetened by the distant sound of fiddlers and singers performing in a nearby courtyard. The farther they walk, the more they see. And the more they see, the more sheepish Sansa appears. Daenerys is certain they can work with that.

Just as she is certain that somewhere the Three-Eyed Raven is watching them now, sure to be displeased at the sight of every Stark and every Targaryen together in King’s Landing.
The Haunting

Chapter Notes

...I promise this has a happy ending. Like, a HAPPY happy ending. That tag is for real. And if y'all don't pull a "For the Watch!" on me or jump ship between now and the remaining 2-3 chapters, I have a HAPPY happy sequel coming

I.

“This is my bed,” Arya says, pointing at the single bed near the opened window.

Sansa eyes the second bed in the room, another single that’s currently drowning in discarded clothes and hoarded letters. She assumes that’s to be her bed. She walks over and perches uneasily at the end, on one of the only free spots.

“You don’t have handmaidens here?” she demands, casting a critical eye over the messy room. “Or servants?”

She had been impressed by what the Dragon Queen had done in Flea Bottom, and in King’s Landing overall, but that had faded to befuddlement once they made it to what remained of the Red Keep, which was naught but a faint whisper of the bones of what used to be. Hardly anything still stood: not Meagor’s Holdfast, not the Great Hall, not the Tower of the Hand. There didn’t seem to be any serious efforts at rebuilding it, either: she had seen a few builders repairing a stained-glass garden— of all things— but there was no evidence of a true castle being rebuilt.

Instead, they are here. In the Maidenvault— a structure built to house two maidens comfortably and little more, housing House Targaryen and its court. Sansa was stunned by how overcrowded it was, stunned by the army’s camps littering the courtyard, stunned by the notion she’d be sharing quarters with Arya. Stunned that this was how the Dragon Queen was living— stunned that she did not seem to even realize what squalor it was. It wasn’t even fit for royal guests at Winterfell.

She doesn’t know what to make of it. She had comforted herself on the journey south with reminders that she knew how King’s Landing worked. She had been here before, a prisoner, and she had survived it. She had adapted. But it looks nothing like it should. And that makes her uneasy.

“We have handmaids,” Arya tells her, scowling. “But they’re busy with things much more important than messing with my things.”

Sansa is confused by that. “Like what? That’s largely their job, correct? What else could they have to do?”

“They’re all better at more things than just folding a lady’s clothes,” Arya snaps. “Those good with herbs help at the sickhouses. Those good with numbers, words, and languages help at the scholarhouses. Quite a few help in the gardens, others help with the children, some with the animals…there are even a few who have been helping with the building, and one or two who have been learning defense.”

Sansa can tell Arya loves that. Her words tilt up with pride as she talks of the handmaidens who
chose building or fighting as a hobby.

“And what of living conditions here?”

“We get by just fine. We have five or so handmaids who tend to things here. They come by my chambers weekly.”

“Perhaps you should make it bi-weekly,” Sansa suggests, eyeing the pile of clothing on the bed.

Arya ignores that comment. She comes over to the bed and begins sweeping the clothing onto the floor. Sansa’s hands twitch at her sides. She can’t stop herself from kneeling on the floor beside the ever-growing pile and folding what she can get her hands on.

“Do you empty your own chamberpot, too?” she asks her sister, her disapproval clear.

“Even that isn’t as foul as your attitude.” Her voice is cold.

Sansa’s gut reaction is to shoot something equally cold back at Arya. She knows what she’d say: it’s clear to me why you’re so fond of the Dragon Queen now. She’s made a kingdom for people who don’t conform. But she knows that isn’t altogether a bad thing, and Arya would take her down for that comment.

Instead, she says: “I have to wonder how long the smallfolk will continue to see the queen and king as royal figures when they’re living in conditions as modest as these. Power is a visual illusion. Royalty has the power that it does because royalty lords high above the commonfolk. They live a life befit of a king; they assert their worth through every aspect of their lifestyle. It may not be ideal, but it’s the way it is.”

Arya looks as if she’s smelled something particularly disgusting. “True power needs no ‘visual illusion’. You’ve seen the way the people think of Daenerys and Jon. Do you really think they’d be better respected if they were holed up in some castle while their people starve to death and suffer in ruins? How well has that worked for monarchs before them?”

Sansa thinks at once of the commonfolk turning on Joffrey. But she also thinks of Queen Margaery. How well had her charitable heart served her in the end?

“Just admit ‘the Dragon Queen’ is a good queen. Just admit you were wrong, Sansa. The Three-Eyed Raven misled you. And when we all sit down to talk tomorrow about the Three-Eyed Raven, you’ll understand to what extent.”

Sansa had been hearing strange comments like that all evening over dinner. We’ll tell you more tomorrow, Jon had told her flatly, when she inquired about Bran’s whereabouts and what had happened to him since coming south. He was the reason she’d rushed her journey south—to make sure he was okay. And no one would tell her much of anything. She’d even asked Queen Daenerys, but she had merely repeated what Jon said.

Clearly, something happened. Sansa gathers from Arya’s comment that they believe Bran has been manipulating her. And she’s clever enough to know that he probably has been based on what she’s seen thus far in King’s Landing. The Dragon Queen seems neither unhinged nor evil. She shows no signs of tyranny or undue violence. Jon, Sansa had noted over dinner, seems happier at Queen Daenerys’s side than she’s ever seen him, and he shows no signs of being brainwashed or kept prisoner, either.

But all her actions haven’t been because of Bran.
“I distrusted her long before Bran told me anything,” Sansa reminds Arya. She folds the last article of Arya’s clothing and stands with it in her arms, walking over to set the folded stack atop her trunk. “And so did you,” she reminds her, a note of accusation in her tone. “Now you’re here acting as if she’s your sister.”

Arya observes her for an unnerving moment, her dark eyes cool. When she speaks, her voice is steely.

“She is my sister. She’s Jon’s wife.”

It wounds Sansa. She can’t stop it from doing so.

“Then I suppose that would make Rhaegar Targaryen Father’s brother. Funny, I never heard him speak of him as such.”

“Those two things cannot be compared and you know it, Sansa,” Arya snaps. “You don’t even know her—”

“Hard to.”

“Not at all, actually,” Arya refutes. “She tried her hardest to include you in every conversation tonight. You were the one keeping yourself at a distance.”

Sansa can’t argue that. She had. She was polite, yes, but she just couldn’t get herself to open up to the Dragon Queen. She just couldn’t bear to let herself be seen, known. Not in the way the queen seemed strong enough to show herself.

But Sansa can’t think of a time when being vulnerable has ever served her. The last time she was in King’s Landing, her heart open and soft, her entire world fell apart. Nothing has been right since then.

Sansa goes over and perches on the edge of her now-clear bed. Arya sinks to the edge of her own and peers at Sansa incredulously.

“You still don’t trust her,” Arya realizes.

Sansa can’t deny it. But, if she’s being honest, there is no one she trusts anymore. Not one person on this planet.

“No. I don’t. Why should I?” Why should I trust anyone?

“Because she has proven herself trustworthy time and time again! She has done nothing but sacrifice for the North and support the North! She hasn’t done a thing against you once. What is it going to take, Sansa? When will she be worthy enough for your respect? What does she need to do?”

Sansa doesn’t know the answer to that, and that makes her feel a bit frightened. She doesn’t know what it’s going to take to make her trust again. In her darkest moments, she’s certain nothing ever will.

“Her father burned our grandfather alive,” she reminds Arya. She feels that’s been forgotten overnight, that all the horrible things House Targaryen has done have been swept under the rug simply because Daenerys Targaryen has allowed peasants the opportunity to learn to read or provided them access to qualified care when they’re ill. Great things, surely—if one can pay for them—but is it good enough to overshadow the things Daenerys’s father did?
Arya clearly thinks so. She rolls her eyes at Sansa’s words. It’s extremely rude.

“Daenerys could have done the same to you many times over, but she didn’t. Even when she had plenty of reason to. You threatened to march armies south to usurp her, Sansa. What do you think Joffrey would have done in Daenerys’s place? What do you think Cersei would have done?”

Sansa knows what they would have done. But Jon wasn’t warming Joffrey or Cersei’s beds.

“Jon wouldn’t let her do that to me,” Sansa says. “Her mercy has little to do with her.”

Arya laughs loudly. It’s biting.

“You think the queen’s mercy comes from Jon? If you think Jon has been here shielding you from Daenerys all this time, you’re as mad as you’ve tried to claim she is. There were times Daenerys was the one talking Jon down. Jon made the decision to move the Northern seat to Hornwood. Jon made the call to demand you come down here to discuss the future of Winterfell. When he heard that you and Bran were conspiring against Daenerys’s life, he was ready to execute you himself.”

This pulls Sansa up short. She looks strangely at Arya.

“I was never conspiring against the queen’s life,” she says. “I only wanted Jon on the throne. It’s his birthright—he’s next in line—and Bran told me…” she trails off. “I see now that the things Bran told me he saw were either untrue or much farther in the future than he led me to believe. But I was never trying to have her killed.”

“Really? And what did you think would happen to her if your sad little army miraculously managed to cast her down?”

“We were going to send her back to Essos,” Sansa says honestly. “That’s what Bran said.”

“Bran wasn’t Bran. Bran was the Three-Eyed Raven. And he wants Daenerys to die. No—he wants her to suffer. He told us that he told you whatever he had to tell you to convince you. He manipulated you and he played you. He can join the long list of men who have managed to do that to you.”

Sansa nearly flinches at that. “You’re being cruel,” she tells her sister.

“Am I? Sorry—I suppose I should ask your permission before encroaching on your territory.”

“I’m cruel?” Sansa demands.

“Incredibly cruel. You’re sat here refusing to get to know our sister—”

“Our cousin’s wife is not our sister—”

“Oh, Jon is our cousin now? Funny. He was your brother as long as it was convenient for you to claim him,” Arya snaps. Sansa can tell she’s furious by how splotchy her cheeks have turned. “Jon is my brother. For as long as I live. And Daenerys is my family. She’s my friend. Which is more than you’ve ever been to me.”

“Your friend,” Sansa repeats skeptically.

“Yes. My friend. And you could be our friend, too, but you’re too selfish and stubborn and stupid,” Arya snaps. “You want to be alone and miserable. Fine. Be alone and miserable. But don’t wonder why you’re the way. You’re the way because you chose it.”
“No, I’m that way because you abandoned your family and your home—”

“Look around, Sansa! This is where the last of the Starks are! Here!”

“The Starks belong in Winterfell.”

“Winterfell doesn’t exist anymore. Not the way you think of it. Winterfell died with Father, with Mother, with Robb, with Rickon!” She takes a deep breath. Sansa wonders how close she is to striking her. “I understand, Sansa. I felt this way, too. Like the only way to be happy or safe again would be to recreate the safety we had in our childhood. But we aren’t children anymore, and that safety doesn’t exist. Our only choice is to build a new home, a new family, a new safety.”

Sansa shakes her head. “And you think that’s here? With Daenerys Targaryen?”

“I know that’s here with her. Because I’ve found it.”

Sansa doesn’t understand. She peers at Arya like she’s never seen her before—maybe she hasn’t.

“What do you see in her?” she demands.

“Make an effort to know her. Then you’ll see for yourself.”

She and Arya had never had the same taste in friends. Sansa isn’t optimistic that time has changed that. But she sees this is a fight she’s not going to win: she won’t be able to convince Arya that Queen Daenerys isn’t a good friend any more than she’d been able to convince her that her butcher’s boy had been poor company when she was small. Whatever Arya sees in Daenerys Targaryen, she sees it keenly. Sansa has to admit, at the very least, makes her curious.

But it’s a curiosity that must wait until the dawn. It’s late now, the night sky drenched black, and Sansa is weary from traveling. She and Arya don’t speak as they ready for bed, and once Sansa crawls beneath the blankets of her small bed, she’s surprised to find it’s actually very comfortable. The linens are clean and soft, and they smell of lavender. The mattress is stuffed to the perfect level of firmness, and the pillow melds to the curve of Sansa’s neck. Even the crowded nature of the Maidenvault doesn’t turn out to be as much of a nuisance as she’d expected: the distant, quiet conversations that drift in through the open window don’t disturb her as much as comfort her. She had spent so long alone that the sound of others is comforting.

She looks across the dark room at Arya. She’s bundled up in her own bed, hair loose on the pillow, face smooth and relaxed. Sansa’s eyes drift around the rest of the room. There’s Needle, resting atop a table. A stack of letters upon a writing desk. A couple spears that must belong to the Unsullied leaning against the wall in one of the far corners. Three books stacked at her bedside. There are small touches of Arya everywhere.

It’s undeniable: this is Arya’s home. It’s not a place she’s sleeping temporarily. This is her home. And what hurts worse is how well Arya fits in it. How well it suits her.

Sansa never could have imagined that Arya would be the one happy in King’s Landing, the one who is friends with the queen, the one who has a place in the kingdom.

And Sansa, the one who feels like she doesn’t fit in her own skin. The one who feels like an outsider. The one who feels like she doesn’t belong.

Sansa knows how to play the game like the best of them. She learned from the best. She knows how to manipulate, how to wager, how to act strategically in all realms of life. But as she lays there and stares out at the moon, she realizes the game she’s perfected isn’t even being played anymore. Queen
Daenerys isn’t hosting it, much less playing it herself. Sansa’s knowledge and skill have little use here. All she learned, all she suffered to learn, she learned for naught.

Were her pride just a bit less, she could have cried herself to sleep.

II.

Arya is gone when Sansa wakes the next morning.

Sansa knows what’s ordinarily expected of a guest, but none of the rules she once learned seem to apply here, so she’s not sure where she should go first or what she should do. She sticks her head out of Arya’s chambers in search of a handmaid, someone who might know where Sansa’s to report to first, but the hallway is empty beyond a few of the queen’s guards. Sansa doesn’t know how to speak to them, and anyway, she’s in her dressing gown and feels it wouldn’t be proper.

She dresses for the day, finds the privy, and thankfully stumbles upon a handmaiden. She’s a pretty Dothraki woman, probably only a couple years older than Sansa herself. She smiles at Sansa.

“Lady Stark,” she greets, her Common Tongue heavily accented. “You sleep well?”

“Yes, thank you,” Sansa answers politely. “Do you know where I should go?”

The handmaiden doesn’t understand. She adjusts the bed linens in her arms, her smile slipping a bit.

“I don’t understand,” she admits, a bit sheepishly. “Go?”

“Where do I go?” Sansa repeats, slower this time, hoping that will help. She tries to think of how to simplify the question, but isn’t sure how. How does Arya communicate with the people here? Sansa wonders. Knowing Arya, she’s learnt a good bit of both languages already.

“Where you want to go?” the handmaiden asks.

Sansa realizes her confusion is not because she doesn’t understand Sansa’s words. She just doesn’t understand what Sansa is asking.

“The Queen doesn’t require my presence?” Sansa asks uneasily.

She smiles. “If Queen Daenerys needs you, she send for you. You enjoy the beautiful day.”

She nods at Sansa, still smiling, and continues down the corridor. Sansa nearly asks her to go tidy Arya’s room, but somehow, she senses that this handmaiden is not taking orders from anyone. She’s doing what she wants to do when she wants to do it. Which is what she’d told Sansa to do, but Sansa can’t imagine what on earth she would want to do here— she’d never imagined she’d have free time of any kind. She’d envisioned most of her visit being spent in tense conversation with the queen’s small council.

She’s not that hungry yet, but she is thirsty, so she makes her way uneasily towards the crowded hall they’d taken their meal in the evening prior. Like last night, the long table at the front of the room that should be for the queen and king is laden with food, and people are serving themselves at their own leisure. Sansa waits uncomfortably in a short line, pours her own mug of tea, and then hesitates in the rowdy room full of soldiers, servants, and people she thinks might have once been important in the Red Keep. She sees no place for her— no seat at any table that she would feel right at— so she takes her tea and leaves the hall. She wonders where Arya has gone, where Jon has gone, but she wouldn’t even know where to seek them out. She feels embarrassed and angry that they would have left her alone without telling her where to go or what to do, or where to find them. She imagines the
three of them— Jon, the Dragon Queen, and Arya— are somewhere laughing together. Perhaps at her expense.

She walks around the bustling courtyard as she sips at her tea, hardly tasting it at all. Her few bannermen are mixed in with the other bannermen from the other Northern houses, laughing and drinking ale. Hers smile at her and come over to make sure she doesn’t need assistance, and Sansa considers asking them to accompany her, but she doesn’t have anywhere in mind to go, and they won’t make her feel less lonely, anyway.

She wanders towards the destroyed ruins of the rest of the Red Keep, the most unpopulated area. She treads carefully around mountains of brinks, only realizing once she’s walked further that those piles of bricks had once been the place her father’s head had been. Once she realizes that, it’s easier to orientate herself. She’s able to walk with half her sight in front of her and half on her memories. She walks through the ruins of the Tower of the Hand. She stands for a while outside the crumbling remains of Meagor’s Holdfast, her mind taken over with a series of bad memories. The Great Hall still has a few walls standing, though they serve little purpose with the ceiling crushed to dust and the guts of the throne room exposed. Sansa spots the top of what must be the Iron Throne from over a half-demolished wall: she’s surprised that no one is here guarding it, or rebuilding the room. Surprised that she can just step over the wall and enter, not a person in sight.

Her feet slide on dust, ash, debris, and rubble. The Iron Throne seems to be bathed in ash so fine and white it appears to be snow. The topmost part of it is warped; the high heat of the fire that destroyed the Hall melted some of the swords down just enough to make them twisted and wrong. Despite that, though, it’s intact— yet forgotten. That surprises Sansa more than anything else. She would have assumed that’d be the first thing Daenerys Targaryen would have repaired, but it appears to her that no one has even stepped foot in here in weeks.

She looks around herself before approaching the Iron Throne, just to make sure no one has entered behind her. She walks slowly up to it. It’s much less powerful than it’d seemed when she was a girl. She stands in front of it uncertainly, and before she can change her mind, she pulls her cloak off and drapes it over the ash-caked surface, lowering down to sit on the cloak—on the Throne. But she sits on the very edge, and she’s surprised at how hard it is.

An unexpected voice echoes through the destroyed hall.

“Not very comfortable, is it?”

Sansa stands the instant her eyes lock with the queen’s, embarrassed. Queen Daenerys approaches the Throne, the hem of her black and crimson dress dragging a trail through the ash and soot, Jon’s direwolf pressed to her side. Sansa stands stiffly in front of the Throne, feeling more and more sheepish with every approaching step the queen takes.

“Red Fly saw you headed this way. I thought we might talk, and this is as good a place as any. We’re unlikely to be interrupted here.” She stops in front of Sansa. She gestures at the Throne. “You can sit there, if you like. It matters little.”

Sansa eyes the queen’s prominent stomach. It wouldn’t be proper to leave her standing even if she wasn’t the queen.

“You should sit here,” Sansa says at once, stepping out from in front of the Throne. “You earned it, after all.”

“I did,” the queen agrees. “And you see how much use I’ve found for it.”
Sansa doesn’t know what to say back to that. To her, it’s shocking that the Iron Throne is here abandoned like this. It seems a waste. She would think a Targaryen would agree.

The queen does take her rightful seat on the Throne, but Sansa can tell it’s only because it’s the only available place to sit. Her hands rest naturally on her bulbous stomach once she’s sitting, and Sansa is surprised when she toes out of her boots, letting them fall casually to the floor as if she were in the privacy of her own bedchambers. The queen’s socked feet swing above the floor comically; she holds herself in such a way that Sansa often forgets how short she really is, but it’s glaring now. Ghost sits near her feet, his red eyes never leaving Sansa. She finds it unnerving, unjust. I’m your family, she wants to tell Ghost. You have no right to look at me as if I’m a threat to an outsider. But the Dragon Queen is no outsider to Ghost. Sansa can tell that easily. And if she ever doubted the sincerity of Jon’s feelings for the queen before that moment, she doesn’t anymore. Ghost couldn’t fake loyalty to this degree.

The queen breaks the silence.

“Forgive me, my feet feel as if I’ve been dancing with a clumsy giant,” she jests, smiling.

Sansa smiles back, but she’s annoyed. Annoyed by her crown of braids, her easy smile, her adorable frame. Annoyed with how at ease she appears, how at home. She knows her annoyance stems from jealousy, but what can she do for that? All her life, she’s wanted to be where the Dragon Queen is now. Married to a strong, handsome man that she loves, a man she’s soon to present an heir to, ruling over a kingdom that adores her, her beauty bright and undeniable. The last time she was here in King’s Landing, she briefly thought she would be. Worse still that it’s Jon she’s married to. Jon had been Sansa’s last safety ever since she fled to him after escaping Ramsay. He was the first man to truly protect her since Littlefinger dropped her in the den of hell. And the queen took him away from her. She doesn’t want Jon in the way the queen has him, but she still feels as if Jon is hers. It’s just another thing she’s been denied.

“What would you like to discuss, Your Grace?” Sansa asks, hoping the queen will let her leave soon. She wants nothing more than to go back to Arya’s room and hide beneath her covers. Sleep would be nice. Not being for a time would be nice.

“I had hoped I could get your thoughts on something,” the queen says. It’s far from what Sansa is expecting, but her surprise turns into resentment quickly. The queen doesn’t need her advice on anything. She’s trying to flatter Sansa, trying to make her feel needed — and it is extremely condescending. “One of my new projects has hit a bit of a snag. I want to provide planting lessons at my scholarhouses so that families may start their own small gardens. I thought it’d be a great way to both ensure longterm food security and help rebuild confidence. Of course we’d make it optional, and we’d continue feeding the people — and will continue feeding the people indefinitely — but I believe it would enrich the people with a feeling of security, of ownership. However, Lord Tyrion has said it might cause strife with House Rosby, who are the main supplier of food for King’s Landing and rely on our reliance on them.”

Sansa doesn’t even pretend to think about it. She can feel her face reddening with anger.

“My counsel on this will be no better than any counsel you’ve already received. You don’t need my counsel at all.”

The queen’s eyebrows rise. She says nothing. Sansa can’t stop the words from bursting from her lips, pushed forward by the heaviness she feels weighing on her heart every single day. The heaviness that hasn’t left for years.
“You have no use for me, Your Grace. I have no place here. Let’s not pretend any differently. It is an insult to us both.”

She waits for the queen’s anger to rise. For her to punish her for the tone she’s taken with her. Is that what Sansa is looking for? Punishment?

“Why do people have to have uses?” Queen Daenerys asks, her voice soft.

Sansa stares at her. “Because,” she says, and then she stops. She regroups, steeling herself, standing tall. Packing her resentment around her heart (protecting it). “Because that’s the way the world is. People use people, and when a person no longer has use, they are cast away.”

“Hmm,” the queen comments. She rubs absently over the center of her stomach, her lips moving down into a frown. “Not in my world. Not my people.”

Sansa audibly scoffs. She can’t help it. She wants nothing more than to scream hurtful things at the queen. She wants to make her feel like she feels.

But that won’t change anything. Bringing Queen Daenerys down won’t lift Sansa up. She knows because she’s done it; she contributed to what she thought would be the queen’s downfall, and even then, she hadn’t risen any higher. Hadn’t felt any better. That heaviness had remained. The loneliness.

That knowledge doesn’t change how hard it is to look at her, though. It doesn’t change the annoyance she feels, the jealousy, the resentment. She thinks nothing will.

“You don’t believe me,” Queen Daenerys states.

“I believe you think that,” Sansa answers. “But I don’t believe it’s the reality. If you were suddenly of no use to the people around you, what do you think they’d do?”

“I don’t understand precisely what you mean. What is my main ‘use’?” Queen Daenerys asks. “Slaves are kept for their ‘use’. People are not. The people around me love me. It took me a long time to see that. I wish that you could. I wasn’t trying to offend you. I was just trying to talk to you. Trying to know you. I thought—based on how thorough you were with rationing in Winterfell—that you might have thoughts on the matter. That’s all. It wasn’t a manipulation.”

Sansa doesn’t respond straightaway. Her knees hurt from standing so long. She chooses to sink down and sit on the highest step by the Throne. She ordinarily wouldn’t, but she doesn’t care about much of anything right then. Let her seem disrespectful and improper.

She wishes she believed the queen, but she doesn’t. She doesn’t believe that anyone speaks without manipulating. Isn’t that what everyone does? Speaks to try and get a certain response? Acts to try and get a certain thing from someone?

“Why do you dislike me so much?”

Sansa’s eyes close as she sighs. She doesn’t even look up at the Throne or the queen.

“I never said I dislike you, Your Grace,” she says emotionlessly.

“You never needed to. It was clear.”

Sansa can’t exactly deny that.
I don’t know what else I can do or say to bridge this gap between us. And I want to bridge it, Sansa. But I won’t beg you for your kindness. I won’t plead for your friendship. At the end of the day, it means little if you dislike me: I have been disliked by a great many people, conspired against by a great many people, hunted down and nearly killed by a great many people. I survived it all, and I’ll go on surviving it. But all my efforts to reach my hand out to you have been genuine. I admit I just don’t know what it is that I’ve done that has upset you so deeply.”

Sansa can’t respond to that because she doesn’t know, either. She just knows, from the moment Jon first mentioned going to see her, she knew that Daenerys Targaryen would always be the person she wished she was. She would always have the power Sansa wished she had. The power that would make her safe—the power she needed to ensure she would never go through the things she’d been through ever again. But she can’t very well say that.

“Is it jealousy?”

Sansa’s head snaps in the queen’s direction at that question. She parts her lips to voice her offense, to deny, deny, deny—but nothing comes out but a huffy-sounding breath.

Oddly, the queen laughs. It’s a dry, bitter-sounding laugh. “Funny. I often think I’m the last person anyone should be jealous of.” She grasps the arms of the Iron Throne and slowly heaves herself up, her stomach clearly a hindrance. Sansa watches warily as she steps over towards the spot Sansa’s sitting, Ghost trailing quiet as a shadow after her. Queen Daenerys sets her hand on Ghost’s back, using him to steady herself as she slowly lowers to sit beside Sansa. It’s clearly not easy for her, and getting up is certain to be worse, but once she’s sat beside Sansa, Sansa finds she feels a bit less annoyed. She understands why the queen came to sit beside her. She understands what she’s saying. And she appreciates it, even if she doesn’t fully believe it. The queen could show Sansa that she thinks they’re equal by sitting on the floor with her, but at the end of the day, she was still queen, and Sansa was still nothing but the daughter of a dead Northern lord. Not Wardeness of the North, certainly not Queen in the North. Nothing. How many years had it been since she felt like more than nothing?

“Jealousy is corrosive. For many years, I was jealous of people just like you. People who grew up with parents who loved them. People who had a childhood. People who had siblings who loved them—truly loved them. Even now, thinking of the joy you must’ve experienced as a child, I feel it.”

Sansa wants to deny that, but she hears the yearning in the queen’s tone.

“What, really, are you jealous of? My rule? Trust me, Sansa, it’s nothing like you think it is. I sacrificed nearly everything to get it, and it’s a labor of love every single day. It is not luxurious. I lived better in Meereen. I know you see that.”

Sansa says nothing.

“What, then? The power? Power is a terrible thing. It’s necessary to make the world better, yes, but crafting and keeping power requires sacrifice, too. Power doesn’t fix anything because power is not stagnant. You can be the most powerful person in the world at night and wake to find your power dashed to dust at your feet come morning. It is no guarantee of stability, no guarantee of safety or happiness. If anything, I’ve found the greater your power, the fiercer your foes.”

Hearing that is like hearing there’s no point to anything at all. Sansa turns away, her stomach dropping. If power can’t protect you, what can?

“If not that, what?” Queen Daenerys continues softly. “My marriage? The baby? You can have those
things, too, Sansa.”

“I can’t.” Sansa says. Her voice sounds faraway. She doesn’t mean to speak at all, much less say words she hadn’t even thought of beforehand. It bursts from her.

“Of course you can,” the queen says at once. “You’re beautiful and clever— you could have any lord you wanted.”

She doesn’t understand. She doesn’t know what Sansa knows. She doesn’t know that she wakes in terror a couple nights every week, petrified that she might see Ramsay on the other side of her bed. She doesn’t know that she flinches any time someone touches her without prior warning. She doesn’t know that Sansa feels physically sick any time she sees herself in any color close to the ivory of her wedding gown, that for the longest time she couldn’t even shut any doors in Winterfell lest she remembered being locked in Ramsay’s chambers day and night. She doesn’t know that Sansa can’t go a day without hearing her own words playing back in her head, a warning of what’s to come: Your words will disappear. Your house will disappear. Your name will disappear. All memory of you will disappear. Sometimes, she’s certain she already has.

“I will never,” Sansa says, her voice thick. She thinks of the burning pain of Ramsay forcing himself on her, the terror she felt pinned beneath him. The desperation that gnawed at the pit of her stomach day in and day out. The horror that warped her mind, her heart— the coldness that seeped into her bones and never left. “I will never marry ever again.”

Her eyes burn with tears she refuses to shed. She has cried enough because of him. When will the trauma stop, she wonders. When will she be free? Sometimes, she wishes she would die rather than live suffocated like this for the rest of her days. Rather than live alone, too afraid to trust anyone, chained by the injustice she’s endured. She can’t even remember who she used to be. She wouldn’t even know if she ever found herself again: she wouldn’t recognize her.

The heaviness in her chest is suffocating her. She hardly notices the queen’s hand on hers. When it registers, she snatches it away, her first sob working its way up her throat. She is furious with herself for crying, but she can’t stop it. She’s not sure she’s ever properly mourned what Ramsay took from her. She’s never spoken of it— not really. Arya knew the bare minimum of what she’d been through, and Jon, too. But nobody knew the darkness of it, the terror. The haunting. You can’t kill me. I’m part of you now.

His words have disappeared, and his house, too. But the trauma he inflicted upon her hadn’t. Right then, she’s positive it never will.

The queen doesn’t take her hand. Instead, she struggles to stand, one hand pressed to the floor and the other holding onto Ghost’s fur. From Sansa’s blurred peripheral vision, she sees Ghost move behind Queen Daenerys, pushing against her back with his massive body and helping her up. Sansa’s confused when she stands only to sit back down slowly and painstakingly again— this time right in front of Sansa so that they are face-to-face.

When the queen reaches out and touches her chin, Sansa doesn’t flinch. She’s curious about what she is going to say— what she feels so strongly about that she went to the trouble of moving directly in front of her to say.

“It was wrong, what happened to you,” the queen says, her voice quiet yet brimming with fierceness. Sansa tries to look away, but the queen’s violet eyes follow hers. Sansa’s vision grows blurry. “It wasn’t okay. It never should have been allowed to happen. Somebody should have stopped it— somebody should have protected you. The person who should have done that sold you off. That was wrong, too.”
Sansa wants to feel furious that the queen knows as much as she does about the things she’s been through. Who told her? Varys—the Master of Whisperers? Did he know what Littlefinger had done—had he told the queen before he died? Or was it Arya? Or even Jon? Sansa doesn’t know, but she can’t seem to get herself to care as much as she knows she should. Instead, the queen’s words bounce around her mind. It wasn’t okay. It never should have been allowed to happen. Somebody should have stopped it. Somebody should have protected you. It’s as if she’s reached into the haunted part of Sansa’s mind and yanked free everything she’s thought on a loop since that horrible night of her wedding. She feels exposed, vulnerable, weak, but in a different way than before. A way that almost makes her feel validated. Seen.

Sansa’s lips tremble slightly, but she pushes them together tightly, refusing to audibly cry. She can’t do anything for the tears tumbling over her eyelashes, but she can stop that.

“If I could go back in time and stop it from happening to you and every other woman who ever endured anything like it, I would. If I could go back in time, I would punish him for what he did to you. I would burn him alive where he stood and watch him turn to ash. You were able to get some justice for yourself, yes?”

Sansa isn’t sure she’d call it that, but she says: “Yes.” There’s a short pause. “I fed him to his dogs.”

“Alive, correct?”

“Yes.”

“Good. But I know justice does little to erase pain. Not the way you think it might beforehand.”

Again, Sansa feels as if her darkest looping thoughts are being birthed into the warm air—but it doesn’t feel bad.

“*All we can do is learn to control that pain, learn to keep it from drowning us. We can’t turn back time, though I wish so much that we could. All we can do is work to make the world better. All we can do is fight for the people out there who haven’t yet lived through those things—the ones we can protect. That is how you master it. That is how you feel safe again, how you feel strong. By being strong for other people, by doing for them what no one would do for you. What no one could do for you. Strength is not distrust and fear—strength is love. Strength, sometimes, is weakness.*”

The queen’s fingers drop from Sansa’s chin. Her touch is light as she pulls Sansa’s hair over her shoulders, straightening it almost absently by combing her fingers through it. Sansa wonders why it doesn’t feel frightening or unnatural. She wonders why it almost feels comforting.

“And one day, if you will it, you will meet somebody good. Somebody that you trust. Somebody who will love you properly. Not use you—love you. For all that you are, for all that you’re not. Someone who will protect you, not hurt you. What was done to you doesn’t make that impossible. You’re still you, and you still deserve all the things you yearned for as a young girl. You can still have them.”

“I can’t.” It’s hardly more than an exhalation.

“You can. Who is going to stop you?” Daenerys asks.

*Me*, Sansa starts to say, but then she stops. It’s the first time she’s ever realized that *she* is her only enemy right now. *She* is the only one holding herself back from anything. Oddly, that thought itself comforts her. After the foes she’s fought against, this is nothing.

“We’ve been communicating through others for a while now,” the queen continues. “Now I am
speaking directly to you, and there will be no misunderstandings or miscommunications. Just me to you and you to me. Sansa, you must know by now that the Three-Eyed Raven was manipulating you. We will discuss the number of ways he did that once we are all together in the council room. He tried his hardest to manipulate Jon and I, too, so I know how confusing it can be. I know how deceitful he is, how powerful he can be. And I understand that, but I also understand that not all of that was Bran. You’ve made your own choices. As you said before, it’s an insult to both of us to pretend we aren’t as clever as we are. Bran was able to manipulate you because you had already decided to cast me down, had already decided to betray Jon’s trust and tell the world his true identity. We both know this.”

Sansa keeps waiting for the queen’s voice to take on an angry, scolding tone, but she speaks as she’s been speaking the entire time: calm, soft. Had she tried to speak to Sansa about this before she hung Sansa’s darkest thoughts out in the sun, Sansa wouldn’t have heard a word of it. Her distrust and dislike would’ve been too loud to hear anything she said. But she’s listening now, even if only out of curiosity to see where the queen might take this. To see the color of her true nature now that they’re sitting here like equals, speaking directly to one another, pretenses and manipulations aside.

“You’ve been through horrible things,” the queen goes on. “Things nobody should have to go through. Things that take time to recover from. But that is no excuse, either. I have been through terrible things, too. I have suffered, too. Yet I am held accountable for every mistake I ever made: it matters not how traumatized I was when I made it.”

Sansa thinks the queen might be frightened as she takes Sansa’s hand in hers: her hand is trembling a bit. She can’t imagine what she’s frightened of. She pulls Sansa’s hand over and presses it to her stomach, and Sansa can feel the baby’s movements easily. She counts three hard, spirited kicks. Sansa remembers feeling Rickon moving in her mother’s stomach, but time has dulled the memory so much that this almost feels like the first time she’s experiencing this. Her heart jolts in her chest, and though she can tell the queen is extremely uncomfortable with someone’s hand over her child (she’s still trembling), she continues to hold Sansa’s hand there as she speaks.

“This is my daughter. Jon’s daughter. Soon, she will be here in this world with us, and there is nothing I won’t do to keep her safe. So I need you to listen very carefully, because I will not repeat any of this ever again.”

Sansa feels the queen’s gaze on her face. She tears her eyes from the queen’s stomach and looks up at her violet eyes. She’s not surprised to find them brimming with emotion.

“When you threaten me, you threaten her. You can tell Arya whatever you like, but you and I both know that you never expected me to get exiled anywhere. You know the game of thrones better than anyone: the only way you leave this hall is as a corpse. And it won’t be happening. I have a duty to my daughter and to the daughters who come after her to build this new world, a world where our daughters won’t have to live through the things we had to live through. I will overcome anything that holds me back from completing that duty. I will do whatever I have to do. From this moment on, Sansa, I take any act of treason as a conspiracy against my child’s life. This child’s life.” She presses harder on Sansa’s hand, bringing her touch closer to the movement inside her womb. “I am a good queen. Jon is a good king. We will rule over each person in this kingdom with as much love and care as we will raise this child with. We will take care of the North as we have been doing, seeing it through every winter and every period of hunger, and should anyone try to harm you or any other Northern house unjustly, we will show them no mercy. Things are going to change, yes, and change can be uneasy. I know I’m nothing like the queens you’re used to, the queens you understand. But this is just the dawn, Sansa. This is the start. Everything is going to be beautiful, you’ll see. Or you won’t. Because if you ever choose to do what you did before—if you ever commit treason against me or Jon ever again—we will execute you. We will not invite you south for negotiations such as
these. We will not imprison you. We will kill you. Have I made myself clear?”

Things have never been clearer. Sansa withdraws her hand from Daenerys’s stomach. She feels tearier than she’d felt before, and at first, she thinks it’s from anger. But as she clenches her hand into a fist, the memory of that baby’s movement still echoing against her palm, she realizes it’s regret.

The queen softens again. “You can be part of our family, Sansa. I hope I’ve made it clear that you are welcome here. But please don’t ever mistake that for naivety or weakness. I want to trust you, and I know you want to trust me. Trust is something that has to be built. Let us start with forgiveness.”

Sansa struggles to think of something she should forgive the queen for. For taking Jon, she thinks, but she knows that’s irrational, unfair, and stupid. For taking Arya, but Arya never would have left if Sansa and Bran hadn’t pushed her out with their treason. For what, then? For coming North? She’d saved them when she came North. For taking the Throne? She’d killed Cersei in the process, and hadn’t Sansa wanted that all along? For scolding her? No. It’s been so long since anyone has been that frank and honest with Sansa that it almost feels comforting. It has been so long since she’s looked into anyone’s eyes and felt they were telling her exactly what they were thinking. So long since she’s believed the other person in a conversation isn’t playing games with her. And Queen Daenerys is not playing any games: Sansa sees that in the firm hold of her shoulders, the intensity in her eyes. She means what she’s said.

And Sansa does, too.

“I don’t know if we can be friends,” she says honestly. She thinks it’s possible the dislike has been sown so deeply into the soil of her heart there’s no ripping out the roots. She thinks again of Arya calling Daenerys her friend and struggles to think of a time she and Arya had ever shared the same friend. She tries to imagine that the queen had grown up in Winterfell with her, tries to decide if they would have gotten on. Would Daenerys have fit in with Sansa and Jeyne? Or would she have preferred to spend her time with Arya and her rough, wild friends? It’s so difficult to imagine somebody like Daenerys as a child that she doesn’t get very far in her theorizing.

“That’s fine. We don’t have to be. But we must be on the same side. We must be together against whatever comes. Can we do that?”

Sansa considers it before she answers. She has to force herself not to think about the ways Daenerys might respond to each possible response she could give, and instead, she focuses on the question at hand and what she truly feels. Can they do that?

“Yes,” Sansa decides. “But if it ever somehow becomes you versus Jon—”

“Then you and I shall have a problem,” Daenerys completes for her, unconcerned. “That should be your last concern, Lady Sansa.”

“It’s not strictly a concern of mine. But I felt I should be upfront with you. As long as you are good to Jon and to Arya, and to the North, we are on the same side.”

“Then I believe an alliance has been made,” Daenerys says.

Whatever mood has taken over them—trust, Sansa theorizes, but it’s been so long since she’s felt that she just can’t be sure— is ruined by the sound of approaching footsteps. Sansa moves out of Daenerys’s touch at once, turning to look towards the sound of bricks and glass being crushed underfoot. Jon stops in the middle of the throne room and takes in the sight of them sitting together on the floor beside the Iron Throne. Sansa can feel the tears drying on her cheeks and how swollen
her eyes are, but she can do little for it. To Jon’s benefit, he doesn’t ogle at her teary eyes or make a spectacle of her and Daenerys talking together.

“Bit low of a seating arrangement for you,” Jon comments to the queen. “Actually low, I mean. How were you planning on getting up?”

The queen looks back at Ghost, and he moves behind her, pushing into her back as he’d done before. She reaches over and grips the arm of the throne, using it to help tug herself to her feet.

“Like that,” she answers.

“Ah.” Jon steps up the stairs separating them. He sets an approving hand on Ghost’s massive head.

“Good boy, Ghost.”

Before Sansa can rise, the queen turns around and offers her her hand as if she means to pull Sansa up. Sansa eyes her hand, but for a different reason than she had when the queen held it out the last time.

“With all due respect, Your Grace,” Sansa begins carefully. “I am much taller than you, and you are…” Sansa trails off, searching for a respectful way to say it. “Close to your time.”

“I’ve got two or three moonturns left until my time,” the queen argues. Sansa eyes her stomach and thinks that two already sounds extremely generous, but she’s no maester. She takes the queen’s offered hand, but she hardly pulls on it at all. She rises to her feet on her own.

“Are Lord Tyrion and Ser Davos ready for us?” Daenerys asks Jon.

“Yes.”

“Has Lord Tyrion sobered up?”

“No.”

Daenerys scowls. Sansa can’t help but ask as they walk together from the remains of the Great Hall:

“Is something wrong with Lord Tyrion?”

“He’s drinking far too much for my liking these days,” the queen answers. “And he’s become rather obsessive about—” she stops abruptly. Sansa sees her and Jon exchange a quick look, and Jon’s arm wraps around her waist, his hand pressing to the side of her stomach. “Well, you’ll see soon enough.”

“I suppose we’re going to discuss Bran,” Sansa says, thinking of Arya’s vague comments the night prior.


Sansa looks at Jon. “And where is he?”

Jon meets her eyes. “Bran is in a sickhouse and nearly comatose. The Three-Eyed Raven…your guess is as good as ours.”

Sansa’s face contorts in horrified confusion.

“What?!”

“We’ll explain everything, I promise,” the queen says. “But I think we should all be sitting to do it.”
Sitting does little to help. The news still leaves Sansa disturbed and confused. She looks from Jon to Arya after everyone is done explaining what Bran—the Three-Eyed Raven—Lord Bloodraven—whoever was trying to do.

“He wants to kill the baby,” Sansa surmises slowly, turning to look at Lord Tyrion for affirmation. He nods gravely and twirls the wine around his goblet before taking another sip.

“Because…priests of some religion in Essos said thousands of years ago that…someone would come to kill him? And that someone is the baby?”

“Possibly,” Ser Davos answers. “There’s grey area here. We can only theorize on all things surrounding the prophecy.”

“Until the Priestess arrives,” Lord Tyrion says.

“Even when she arrives. Priestesses can be wrong. They’re wrong more often than they’re right,” Ser Davos counters.

Sansa can tell from the way everyone else sighs that this is a common, frequent argument between the two Hands.

Sansa locks eyes with Jon. “You think he’s gone from Bran completely?”

Jon and Ser Davos exchange a look. “I don’t know. I want to think that. I at least believe he’s not in him currently.”

“He’s gone from him,” Arya interjects firmly. “He left. It’s just Bran now. And once he recovers, he’ll be our brother again.”

Sansa wants terribly to believe in that the way it appears Arya does—wholeheartedly, completely—but she can’t. She reads Jon’s skepticism, too.

“So nothing he said to you or to me was true,” Lord Tyrion says to Sansa. Sansa meets his eyes again. She catches herself frowning at how bleary he appears. There’s no sign of the mental sharpness she had once admired, the kind heart she had once been thankful for. “He played us like a fiddle. He had me nearly on the edge of turning against my queen—even if I thought it was for the greater good—and he had you committing treason.”

Sansa isn’t ready to dive into the ways Bran—the Three-Eyed Raven, she corrects herself—betrayed her. The ways he’d taken advantage of her. The ways he’d deceived her. She feels deeply wounded by it. She had believed in him. She had believed the things he’d said. He’d told her of a future where she’d be in control, safe, and loved. And it had all been lies. It had all been lies for the sake of getting here, to King’s Landing, to kill Daenerys Targaryen’s unborn child. She had been just another spoke in the wheel. He had used her. He would join the long list of men who had.

“I never imagined that’s who he really was,” Sansa says truthfully. Lord Bloodraven, she thinks, remembering a time when she was small that tales of him frightened her so deeply that she would plead with the septa to stop their lessons early any time they spoke of him.

“No, I wouldn’t imagine you did,” Lord Tyrion says, laughing dryly. “All that time I spent researching the Three-Eyed Raven, and it never even crossed my mind.”

They are quiet. Sansa knows they’re giving her time to process all she’s been told. It took a long
while for them to update her on all the things she’d missed, and it had seemed to her that every sentence they added onto the tale made it more and more twisted.

Sansa looks at Jon. At Daenerys. “What he did to you two—I didn’t know—”


“It’s awful.”

She thinks of how ill Jon had appeared the entire time he was in Winterfell. She had thought it was a sign of his discontent with Daenerys. That’s what Bran had assured her. But all along, Bran had been going into his head and torturing him. Same with Daenerys. Sansa thinks of all the times Bran would suddenly ‘go away’ during conversations. It’s difficult now to realize where he’d been going all those times.

“It was. And it could still happen again. We’ve all got to monitor our thoughts very carefully,” Jon says. “If any of us start having recurring night terrors, we need to inform each other at once.”

Sansa looks back at Tyrion. “How will we find him? Where do you think he went?”

That question makes everyone at the table look around at each other, their expressions twisting unhappily.

“You don’t know,” Sansa realizes. Her heart thumps strangely in her chest; she feels as if it’s being compressed between two heavy weights. She’s frightened. “He could go into anyone’s head? Anyone at all?” She imagines one of their soldiers suddenly turning on them. Worse— she turns to look at Ghost, his massive head resting on the table, his body planted right beside Daenerys. She shudders as she imagines what would happen if Bran went into Ghost’s head. If Ghost turned on Daenerys. His jaws…the queen was so small…“If he could control that girl in the kitchen enough to make her give the queen the wrong tea, he could control Ghost.”

If anyone at the table realized that already, it doesn’t show. They all look at Ghost, visibly horrified at the thought. Surely they’re all noticing how close Ghost’s mouth is to Daenerys’s stomach— how easy it would be for him to kill her child in only one quick, well-placed bite. Sansa has seen Ghost strike and kill before. He had been so silent that Sansa hardly realized what had happened from one second to the next. He went from standing there still to holding a mangled, bloody rabbit between his teeth. Hardly a second passed between the two. If he were forced to turn on Daenerys, there would be nothing any of them could do in time to stop it.

Jon knows that better than any of them. He’s the first to break the disturbed silence.

“Ghost, to me,” Jon calls.

Ghost doesn’t obey immediately; that unnerves Sansa, and clearly Arya, too. Arya stands up, her hand on Needle, as if she thinks Ghost might turn on Daenerys now.

“Ghost,” Jon repeats sternly. “To me.”

Gradually, the direwolf turns and paces over to Jon. Jon pets him, but Sansa notices his hand is quaking a bit.

Sansa can feel Tyrion’s eyes on her, and when she turns to meet his gaze, he’s looking at her like he’s only just realized she’s there.

“Or Drogon,” he adds. He turns to look at the queen and king. “When the Three-Eyed Raven first
tried to turn me against you, Jon, he kept saying only a dragon can kill a dragon. When I found out Jon’s true identity, I assumed he was speaking of Jon killing Daenerys. But…” he trails off, too pained at the idea to finish.

The silence grows thicker, tenser. Sansa looks towards the window. The dragon is no where in sight, but he’d flown low overhead when they were walking to the Maidenvault. He’s been clingy lately, Daenerys had told Sansa. I don’t know what’s gotten into him. I think he’s worried perhaps. Or jealous of all the time I’m spending with Ghost. Or maybe jealous of his new sibling. She’d laughed, clearly joking, and Sansa had smiled. But she has no interest in smiling now. She’s frightened.

“Drogon and Ghost would never hurt me or our daughter,” Daenerys says at once. But the way she’s paled tells Sansa she doesn’t believe that as much as she clearly wishes she did.

“They have been acting different, Daenerys,” Arya admits. “Drogon hasn’t been eating and he nearly pushed you over last night—”

“He was just trying to get me to go for a ride. He doesn’t understand why I haven’t gone in so long,” Daenerys defends at once. Even Sansa can tell she’s growing upset. Her face has flushed and she’s gripping tight to the arms of her chair. “He wasn’t trying to hurt me.”

“Dragons are more intelligent than men. He understands exactly why you aren’t flying right now,” Lord Tyrion argues, his tone careful. There’s a short, heavy pause. “He nearly burnt the Black Cells this morning.”

The queen winces. It’s clear this is something she doesn’t want brought up.

“He didn’t. It just appeared that way. He was agitated— I’m sure he was remembering when Lord Bloodraven was down there, when he hurt me—”

“He’s been stalking you,” Lord Tyrion adds, interrupting her. “Flying after you everywhere you go.”

“He’s not been stalking me! I’m his mother! He’s just missed me and he’s worried! And Ghost—Ghost would never hurt me, either. Ghost sleeps in the bed with us, he wouldn’t hurt us.”

Sansa and Tyrion lock eyes again. She wonders if he’s thinking what she’s thinking: that if she were this Lord Bloodraven, Drogon or Ghost would be her prime target if infiltrating Jon failed. They were both close to the queen on a daily basis and both capable of killing her in an instant if they wanted to.

“Do we think he’s even capable of controlling a dragon?” Jon asks. “That’s got to be harder than getting into a human’s mind.”

“Impossible, I’d think, if we were just talking about some skinchanger. But that’s not what we’re dealing with. Lord Bloodraven is more than that. He’s a sorcerer…and a Targaryen.”

Quiet settles over them again. It is not a peaceful sort.

“He told me that R’hllor controls my power, Drogon’s power,” Daenerys finally says. “Lord Bloodraven says he is controlled by the Great Other. He couldn’t control Drogon if that’s true.”

“Unless your god is losing and Lord Bloodraven’s is winning,” Arya comments unhappily. “Maybe there’s a reason this…Great Other chose Lord Bloodraven. Maybe it was to harness the Lord of Light’s only advantage: fire.”
Sansa’s mind is whirling. She feels as if there are thousands of pieces to this all strewn about in every direction, but she can see some of them coming together, and that is almost exciting.

“Has anyone been able to communicate with Bran? We could ask him. Maybe he remembers the extent of Lord Bloodraven’s abilities,” Sansa suggests.

“We need to try to wake him again,” Tyrion agrees at once. “We should have the maester try the smelling salts once more. We can ask him if he remembers the Three-Eyed Raven ever trying to go into Drogon or Ghost.”

Some pieces fit, but others don’t.

“Though,” Sansa provides, “if he could control the dragon, he could have just made the dragon burn down King’s Landing during the siege, rather than giving up on that plan when the queen was injured.”

That obviously pulls Tyrion up short for a moment. He thinks about that, draining the last of his wine as he does. He drums his fingers on the table for a moment, and then says: “Unless infiltrating a dragon’s mind is so difficult it was a last resort option, one he decided on only after every other one failed.”

“When will the Priestess arrive?” Sansa asks. “Perhaps she will know.”

“Another week or so,” Arya answers. “It depends on the weather. Gendry says the storms have been unusually bad lately.”

_Gendry_. Sansa arches an eyebrow at that, but before she can probe Arya, Ser Davos speaks.

“Your Grace…” he sounds sad. Sansa looks at him, as does everybody else at the table. He’s peering at Daenerys. Somehow, they all know what he’s going to say. “We must have a plan.”

Daenerys shakes her head at once. She swallows roughly, her arms wrapping around her stomach tightly. “No. I will not discuss this.”

“Until the priestess arrives and tells us whether or not this is a true concern, we must err on the side of caution. Drogon and Ghost should be locked up.”

Daenerys shakes her head, her eyes growing glassy quickly. “No, Ser Davos.”

He is braver than Sansa has ever given him credit for. And stronger, too. He presses on despite how upset the queen is growing— despite the sadness cloaking the table.

“We must determine how to get our hands on another Scorpion in case—”

Daenerys pushes back from the table. The screech of the chair legs against stone cuts off Ser Davos. She grips the edge of the table, using it to push herself upright. She seems to sway on her feet as soon as she’s standing. Her hands grip her stomach so tightly Sansa thinks she’s probably pressing half-moons into her skin with her nails.

“No. I won’t have one of those here. I won’t have another made, or stored— if I ever see one again, the person responsible for it will be executed.”

Ser Davos reacts to that with only concern. He looks at Jon. Jon is already rising from his seat, approaching the queen, but she turns from him, her head bowing as soon as her back is to everyone grouped around the table. Sansa feels truly bad for her as Jon wraps his arms around her waist, but
she stands by Ser Davos. He’s right.

As Jon hugs the queen, they watch Ghost walk over to them, trying his hardest to butt between them. It might have appeared affectionate a half-hour prior, but now, it only makes them all move to the edge of their seats uneasily. Arya stands again.

“I don’t like it,” she says tensely, her eyes on Ghost’s every movement. “Jon, you need to lock him away.”

Jon brings his lips near Daenerys’s ear and murmurs something none of them can catch. She says something back—he replies—and Sansa has no idea what was said, but he brushes her hair back behind her ears and merely calls Ghost to his side rather than taking him somewhere to be locked up.

It’s what needs to happen. Sansa knows it. Ghost should be locked away, and Drogon, too. Everyone in that room knows it. But as she looks around the table, she realizes not one of them is going to press it anymore. Not even Arya. The queen’s small council watches her with concerned eyes, clearly bothered by how visibly stricken she is. They love her too much to protect her, Sansa thinks suddenly, and it’s such an odd realization that she can’t believe it at first. She looks around the table again, waiting. For Lord Tyrion to do what a Hand is meant to do, and say the things the queen needs to hear. For Arya, her headstrong sister, to speak out of turn about what she believes in. For Jon, her usually sensible and strong brother, to say it’s what has to happen now.

They don’t. They don’t want to hurt her. Sansa can’t say she has that same problem.

“You told me there was nothing you wouldn’t do to keep your daughter safe,” Sansa says. “Did you mean to say nothing except this?”

Jon cuts his eyes at her, furious. “Close your mouth, Sansa, or I will close it for you.”

“You know I’m right.”

“You don’t understand any of this. Stop pretending like you do,” he snaps.

“I understand enough to know that Lord Bloodraven will win the moment you underestimate him. The moment you start applying rules and limitations to him where there aren’t any.”

Jon turns to face her. “You don’t know that there aren’t any limitations! You weren’t here—you didn’t talk to him as we did!”

“Maybe not,” Sansa agrees, her voicing rising as Jon’s does. “But it seems to me the safest thing to do when you don’t fully understand your enemy is to assume the worst. So you can prepare for the worst.”

“That’s not how strategy works, only you wouldn’t know that, being as you’ve never fought once in your life.”

“So tell me how we use strategy against the Three-Eyed Raven,” Sansa snaps back. “What battle formations should we use? What battle tactics?”

Jon doesn’t have an immediate response to that. He scowls at Sansa, and Sansa scowls back. Arya is watching both of them closely, her hand still on Needle, her eyes flashing to Ghost every couple of seconds.

“Where do you even propose we lock a dragon away?” Jon asks. “You saw what his fire did to the
Red Keep. What on earth could contain him?”

Sansa’s the one that doesn’t have an immediate response this time. She frowns and looks at Tyrion, but he looks just as worried as she feels at that question. That realization. Where could they contain the dragon if he turned on them?

Nobody says it, but everybody hears it anyway. *The Scorpion…*

“We will not be harming Drogon or Ghost. I don’t know how many more times I need to say it. We will not,” the queen declares, her back still to them. Her gait is unsteady as she storms from the council room. Ghost makes to follow her, but Jon calls him sharply. He comes to a reluctant stop.

Jon turns and locks eyes with Sansa. She almost feels bad for the pain in his gaze, but it’s not really her fault. None of *this* is.

“Did you even apologize to her during your little talk?”

It’s clear from his tone that he hasn’t forgiven anything, even if his wife has. Sansa is more wounded by the disgust lurking in his words than anything that’s been said to her in a long time. She hasn’t really realized until that moment that Jon will be the most difficult one to win back over. And he’s the one whose forgiveness she cares about the most.

Sansa doesn’t respond quickly enough. Jon scowls. “I figured not.”

He turns and follows after the queen, Ghost on his heels. He leaves Sansa in a tense silence.

“Nothing you said is wrong,” Lord Tyrion tells Sansa. It makes her feel a bit better. She looks at Arya, but Arya is already walking towards the door.

“Where are you going?” Ser Davos asks.

Arya doesn’t turn around. “To figure out where we can put a rogue dragon. We can’t very well continue our meeting without the queen and king, anyway.”

Lord Tyrion rises as well. “I’m going to visit Bran to see if he’s made any progress.”

Sansa rises, too. “I would like to accompany you, Lord Tyrion.”

He looks surprised for a moment.

“I’d be happy for the company, Lady Sansa,” he smiles. He waits by the door until Sansa has joined him, and then they set off down the corridor. “How does it feel to be back in King’s Landing? It’s quite different than it was the last time we were here together, isn’t it?”

“It’s more than different. It’s unrecognizable,” Sansa corrects. The Red Keep destroyed, Cersei gone, the small council reduced to the king’s sister, Tyrion Lannister, and Davos Seaworth. The smallfolk being fed, ‘sickhouses’ and ‘scholarhouses’ (two things Sansa’s never even heard of before much less seen), women training as guards and builders. Had she stumbled upon the city unaware, she might not have known it was King’s Landing at all.

“The wildfire destroyed nearly everything. The repairs have been nonstop to get it to the state it’s at now, and we still have much to do,” Tyrion shares.

“The rest of the Red Keep, I hope,” Sansa says. She looks down and meets Tyrion’s eyes. “The Maidenvault is…”
“It’s not fit for the queen and king. I know. I keep telling His Grace and Her Grace this, but they keep finding other priorities the moment I can locate the gold to begin serious construction. Do you know they’re planning on keeping the prince or princess in their chambers? Imagine that—the heir to the Iron Throne without their own chambers.”

“Are you serving as Master of Coin, too?” Sansa asks. “I noticed the small council was…small.”

“I am. The king and queen don’t trust many people. I imagine it will be a while before we have a fully functioning council. Truly, I am lucky to still be on it at all. The queen hasn’t been very pleased with me.”

Sansa doesn’t need to be told that. “She doesn’t care for your drinking,” she says, thinking of Daenerys and Jon’s short conversation in the throne room.

“Not in the slightest,” Tyrion agrees. “But I was in trouble long before that. You’re in King Jon’s bad graces for your doubt of Queen Daenerys—I’m in Queen Daenerys’s bad graces for my doubt of King Jon.”

“Perhaps it would be good for us to meet in the middle,” Sansa says, half her mind on the earlier conversation she’d had with the queen. She looks down at Tyrion as he pulls a flask from his pocket. “And for you to dry up.”

“It helps me think,” he defends.

Sansa pulls it from his hand. “It helps you cope. There’s a difference, I’m sure Cersei could tell you all about…it…”

Sansa trails off at the sound of raised voices coming from behind a set of double doors only a few steps away. Both she and Tyrion stop walking. It doesn’t take Sansa long to recognize Jon’s voice, though she can’t make out much of what he’s saying. Daenerys sounds just as upset as he does.

“They sound upset,” Sansa voices, but when she looks down at Tyrion, he’s already walking towards the door, his hand outstretched to knock. “Lord Tyrion, it’s not proper to—” she stops and sighs as his hand pounds the wood.

“Your Grace, is everything okay?” he calls loudly, genuine concern etched over his face.

The raised voices sever. There’s a short pause, and then Sansa hears footsteps approaching the door. She takes a few steps back and rounds the corner so she can’t be seen, not wanting Jon to think she’s eavesdropping.

She hears Jon’s annoyed voice. “Yes?”

Tyrion pauses uneasily. “Is the queen there? I’d like to see her.”

Jon sighs. A second later, Daenerys says: “What is it you need, Lord Tyrion? We’re occupied.”

“Is everything all right? We…” Tyrion trails off. Sansa guesses he’s looked behind himself and realized she stepped away. “I…heard yelling.”

“No. Jon’s stabbed me—see Longclaw, sticking right out from the center of my chest, just here?”

“Okay, my concern irritates you. Noted,” Lord Tyrion says. “I just wanted to make sure things were okay.”
“Things are fine. Do not interrupt us again.”

Sansa waits until the door has shut once more, and then she walks out and rejoins Tyrion. They continue their journey to the stairs.

“She really is put out with you,” Sansa comments.

“Ah, yes, well. I have made a pest of myself these past few weeks. It’s hard not to worry for her.”

“You’re all like that. None of you wanted to say what needed to be said in that council room.”

Tyrion avoids her eyes. “It’s complicated. The dragon…he’s like her child.”

“No. Her unborn child is her child. It’s not complicated at all,” Sansa refutes. “Ser Davos was right.”

“Perhaps so,” Lord Tyrion agrees, troubled. He holds the door open for Sansa as they step out into the sunshine. ‘But the queen will never harm her dragon. Ever. I am certain that the Three-Eyed Raven knows that as well. I think we will soon find our troubles multiplied.”

“And what is the plan for when that happens?”

“We do not have one.”

It is not reassuring at all. “Don’t you think we should have one?”

“Well, I was working on a theory. But then someone crept into my chambers in the dead of night and tossed my book into my chamberpot. So I’m afraid I’m out of clever ideas,” he grumbles.

Sansa’s nose scrunches up in disgust. “Your chamberpot? Who would do that?”

“I don’t know. The Three-Eyed Raven, I suppose.” He looks up at Sansa. She senses a bit of desperation in his gaze: he wants to be believed, understood. She knows the feeling well. “I know I didn’t do it.”

“I can’t imagine Tyrion Lannister would ever willingly destroy a book. What was in the book?” Sansa asks curiously.

Lord Tyrion is abruptly wary. He looks forward again as they continue walking. “You don’t have to pretend to be interested, Lady Sansa, though it is kind of you to do so.”

“I’m not pretending anything. I’m not stupid, Lord Tyrion. I can keep up.”

“That wasn’t what I was questioning at all,” he says, surprised.

He begins telling her about a prophecy of sorts that a Red Priestess relayed in a letter, growing more and more animated the more in depth he gets. Sansa had been told about the prophecy of ‘the princess that was promised’ in the council room, but had yet to hear about this one.

“And the word that nobody knew in Valyrian, I think it’s the name of the Great Other. But it is forbidden: that’s why no one knows it, why I cannot find that word mentioned in any High Valyrian text I read. If it is his name, the prophecy warns that he has many faces, which I suppose relates to him working through both the Night King and through the Three-Eyed Raven, but—”

“My Lord!”
Tyrion stops talking and turns around. When Sansa glances behind them, she sees a maester fast approaching. He is out of breath when he reaches them. He doubles over and sets his hands on his thighs.

“Bran—he’s—”


Both Sansa and Tyrion practically jog their way to the sickhouse. They’re led through a series of connected rooms—all cool and bright—containing tidy rows of beds full of sleeping inhabitants of varying ages, eventually coming to a stop outside of a closed, guarded door. Sansa recognizes the man outside of it, though she can’t remember his name. He’s one of the queen’s trusted advisors, one of her Unsullied.

He steps in front of the door as Tyrion makes to enter, barring access.

“What is she doing here?” he asks, looking at Sansa. She falters.

“She’s with me,” Lord Tyrion says impatiently. He goes to step around the soldier, but he refuses to let him.

“Queen Daenerys knows she’s with you? She knows you’re both here?”

Lord Tyrion is growing irritated. “We don’t have time for this! I need to talk to Bran, there’s no telling how long he’ll be awake this time! Just allow us entrance and you can stand in there and listen to every word we say and report all of it right back to our queen if you’re concerned. Please, Grey Worm.”

The pause is agonizing. Finally, the soldier nods.

“Fine,” he allows, stepping to the side.

Tyrion bursts into the room at once. Sansa follows after with more hesitancy. She thinks she’s prepared to see Bran, but she’s not. The moment her eyes lock with his—the moment she realizes it’s really him—her eyes well with tears.

“Bran,” she says thickly.

He looks so confused. So young. He reaches out to her, his hand shaking. “Sansa,” he says, his voice weak and desperate.

Sansa walks over and joins him on his sickbed. She pulls his weak body upright and folds him into her embrace. As she hides her face into his hair, she feels like an elder sister again. It’s been so long since she has. So long since she’s felt like she’s the protector, rather than the one to be protected. It makes her feel stronger. Braver.

Bran trembles in her arms. She feels his tears, wet against her neck. He’s so weak he can hardly keep his arms clasped around her.

“It’s okay, Bran,” Sansa comforts. She kisses his hair. “It’s all right now.”

It’s difficult for him to speak. Each word he pushes through his lips sounds heavy and labored.

“Jon…Sansa, I need…Jon.”

She can’t help but feel a bit wounded. Doesn’t Bran feel comforted by her presence? She’s his elder
sister. Her presence should be more comforting than Jon’s.

“It’s okay,” she repeats again.

“No…no!” He scrounges for a bit of strength, enough to look up at Sansa. His eyelids are heavy—they keep drooping closed every couple of seconds, and his words become slurred. Soon, he’s only able to get out one word at a time. “Jon…Targaryen…”

“He knows. Everyone knows. We know he’s a Targaryen.”

“No!” Bran repeats, infusing the word with as much energy as he can muster. “Dragon…dragon. Dragon…”

Sansa turns to find Tyrion’s eyes, her heart stilling in fear. Tyrion hurries over to them. He sets his hand on Bran’s shoulder.

“Bran. What about a dragon? Bran, look at me! Fight it—don’t go back to sleep—what about a dragon?”

Bran slumps in Sansa’s arms, his face pressing into her neck. “I need…Jon…”

“We’ll send for him.” Tyrion turns to face the Maester. “Maester Olken, fetch something to keep him awake, and then send for the king.”

“What do you propose I fetch, Lord Tyrion? I have nothing left to give that I haven’t already given.”

Bran grows heavy in Sansa’s arms as he begins to drift off. Tyrion looks helplessly at Sansa. “Do something.”

She has no idea what he expects her to do, but she tries anyway. She grasps Bran’s shoulders and lifts him upright. His head lolls, his eyes shut.

“Bran, do you remember that time you shot an arrow through my window? I was so cross…I thought Mother would be, but you smiled your smile at her and she just melted like she always did…she never could stay angry with you, could she? Bran…do you remember the tower? Do you remember Summer?”

That stirs something in Bran. He struggles to lift his head. His eyelids rise just enough that Sansa can see a sliver of his deep blue eyes.

“Ghost…”

“Yes, Ghost. And Lady, and Nymeria, and Grey Wind, and Shaggydog—”

“Jon…”

“He’s coming,” Sansa assures Bran. She cups his face in her hands. “Hold on. Stay with us. He’s coming.”

But his eyelids have shut again. He leans his face into her hands as he begins to drift back off.

“Sansa,” Tyrion begs.

“I don’t know what else to do,” Sansa admits, growing teary. She doesn’t want him to go. She has so much she needs to tell him. So much that he’s missed. She squeezes his face just enough to try and get his attention, but not enough to hurt him. “Please stay awake, Bran, please. Don’t you want to
see Arya? And Jon?"

“Jon…”

“Yes. Jon, too.”

“Woman. Silver…”

Tyrion interjects. “The queen. Her name is Daenerys Targaryen. She will come, too.”

Sansa doesn’t know what part of Tyrion’s statement does it, but something makes Bran’s eyes open wide again, genuine panic in his gaze. He reaches out, grasping Sansa’s shoulder, his grip weak but insistent. He opens his mouth to speak, but nothing comes out.

“What? What is it!?”

He grips tighter on Sansa’s shoulder.


“Pretend I’m Jon,” Tyrion says urgently. “Tell me what you need to tell him. I’ll tell him everything you say, I swear it. What do you need to say to Jon, Bran?”

Sansa has never seen someone fight to stay awake as hard as Bran does. She grows exhausted just watching him. He lifts eyelids that appear heavy as stones, and each syllable has to be dragged from his throat.

“Dragon,” he chokes out. He’s nearly panting from the strain of trying to say anything at all. He sags; Sansa quickly holds him upright again.

“Just give me a bit more, Bran. Is the dragon being used against them? Is Lord Bloodraven using the dragon?”

Bran flinches as if Tyrion dumped boiling water over him. He cries out, and Sansa looks down at her own hands for a second, worried she’d squeezed too hard on his arms. But it’s not her. It’s fear.

“No—no—no—no—no—no—!”

Sansa meets Tyrion’s eyes, horrified.

“He’s gone,” Sansa tries to reassure Bran, but that only upsets him more.

“NO! No!” He pulls from Sansa, falling back on the bed, too weak to hold himself up. Tears slip down the side of his face, leaking from the corners of his closed eyes. “Here. Here…”

Sansa leans back from Bran, her breath catching in her throat.

“How?” Tyrion shakes Bran hard. Sansa hesitates, unsure whether she should intervene or not. Bran can’t seem to lift his eyelids anymore, but he manages to squeeze out one more word.

“Silver…”
He slips away from them—or perhaps he’s taken. Sansa’s unsure, but he is nearly lifeless a moment later. If it weren’t for the slight rise and fall of his chest, Sansa would believe him to be dead.

Tyrion swears loudly. Sansa closes her eyes and tries her best not to cry. She’s starting to realize what they are facing, and she feels hopeless.

“Let’s go tell Jon not to bother coming,” Tyrion says, resigned. “I doubt he wakes ever again.”

IV.

Daenerys’s eyes could burn straight through him. Jon has never seen such fury.

“I won’t!” she roars. “He’s my child, Jon! He hasn’t done anything to warrant what they’re suggesting! I am his mother—I will not stand by as he’s punished for some hypothetical crime!”

Jon meets her rage head-on. “You were just saying last night that he’s acting strangely. How can we risk it, Dany? Gods, Dany, what if the Three-Eyed Raven makes him burn down Flea Bottom? All you’ve built, all the work you’ve done, all those people. And Ghost…”

Jon’s throat narrows. He feels a dry heat crackling behind his eyes. He turns and looks towards the balcony. Ghost is lying on the floor, his face on his massive paws. Jon can almost feel his confusion. Jon had raised his voice at him when they’d entered the room after Ghost had gently nosed Dany’s stomach. It had been affectionate, but all he could see was Ghost lunging. He had sent Ghost to the balcony and told him to stay; he was terrified. He couldn’t bear the thought of Ghost—a part of him—being used by the Three-Eyed Raven to kill their daughter. He can’t bear it. “Ghost will be locked away, too.” Of course, he can hardly bear the thought of that, either. “Just until the priestess gets here. It won’t be more than a week. Just a week. You’ve locked your dragons away for longer than that before, you told me yourself.”

“And it nearly killed me, and them,” Dany shoots back. Her voice isn’t raised anymore. Instead, it wobbles, tears brimming close to the surface. Jon takes a moment to press the heels of his hands over his eyes, breathing through his own sadness, and then he turns to face his wife. He takes in her swollen eyes, her flushed cheeks, her full, quivering lips. The sight of her conflict brings his own into sharp focus. His eyesight is blurring with tears as he crosses the distance between them and gently grasps her hips, pulling her body against his. He cups the back of her head, bringing her into his embrace, and his first few tears slip out as he feels their daughter’s kicks from where his stomach is pressed to Dany’s. He just can’t risk her — either of them. He just can’t. Even if it kills him.

“But it had to be done,” Jon whispers, his hand smoothing over her braids. She sinks further into his embrace, leaning nearly completely into him now to the point that, if he backed up, she would fall. He grips her closer, his lips pressing briefly to the crown of her head. “I don’t want to do it, either.”

He looks over towards the balcony. Ghost meets his eyes. Does he imagine the accusation he sees there? The pain? He must. It hurts all the same.

“We can’t lock up everyone,” Dany says, her words muffled into his tunic. “We can’t lock up the entire world.”

“I know. But think of how badly Ghost could hurt you if the Three-Eyed Raven managed to possess him for even a second, Dany. He could rip you open with his teeth in the time it takes for us to blink. And Drogon…” Jon trails off. He doesn’t need to tell Dany what her dragon is capable of.

“I can’t lose him,” she says. She soon begins crying, and Jon can’t stop his own tears from falling every time he blinks. He feels an enormous amount of guilt, an enormous amount of pain; it’s an unmanageable weight within his chest. Locking Ghost away feels like imprisoning a bit of himself. It
feel unjust. It feels cruel.

“He’s my child. Nobody understands. I lost my son, Jon, I never even got to hold him, or see him. I never got to kiss him even one time—he was pulled from me and disposed of like something shameful—and then I walked into that fire, and my dragons were born. I had my baby back. How can I do this to him?”

Jon presses his face into her hair, hoping if he hides the sight of his tears, they’ll go away. He doesn’t want to weep, but his pain is only growing by the minute.

“It’s only for a week, just ’til the priestess arrives—”

“You know that’s not true. You know what they were really proposing.”

“They weren’t,” Jon refutes at once, horrified on Dany’s behalf. “They would never ask that of you.”

“Ser Davos said we need to get a Scorpion—”

“Only if Drogon turns on us and we have no other choice!”

“If he turns on us, it’ll be too late. You think we stand a chance against him if the Three-Eyed Raven manages to get control over him?! Scorpion or no Scorpion.”

Jon thinks back to the conversation in the council room. Surely they hadn’t been suggesting that they put Drogon down before he even did anything. That hadn’t been what Jon took away from the conversation. He suddenly understands the earlier intensity of Dany’s reaction. To her, agreeing to lock Drogon away was ultimately agreeing to do away with him.

“We are not doing that,” Jon tells Dany fiercely, suddenly as upset as she’d been the entire conversation. He thinks of Drogon’s fiery eyes, the warmth of his scales. No—they are not doing that. “If anything, we’ll find a place we can contain him ’til the priestess gets here. But that is all.”

Dany lifts her forehead from his chest. She looks up at him, her face wet with tears, her gaze hard.

“Where? Where, Jon?”

He falters. He has no idea.

“We’ll figure it out,” he says soothingly, but neither of them are soothed at all. Dany backs up from his arms and walks over, lowering down onto the end of the bed. She kicks her shoes off her swollen feet, her shaky hands resting on her stomach, fresh tears building in her eyes. Jon can’t get to her side quickly enough. He sits beside her, feeling like he’d just as soon stay in this bed with her for the rest of their lives. Nobody else will understand their pain. Nobody else will understand. Better to just stay here together where they are loved and understood.

“I keep thinking it can’t possibly get any worse,” she whispers, her words tear-soaked, “and then it does. Not Drogon, Jon. Not Ghost. He can’t take them. I can’t bear it. They’re part of us. I feel sick.”

He shares that with her, too. All he can do is pull her into his arms. He has never felt so lost. He presses periodic kisses to her forehead, her shoulder, and her neck as she cries, thinking, over and over: *we can’t beat him. We can’t beat him. He is going to win. I am going to lose Dany, and I’m going to lose my child. We have lost.*
He would never say that aloud. Yet it eats at both of them as if he did, anyway.

“Maybe it hasn’t occurred to him to try to get into Ghost or Drogon,” Jon suggests, scrambling for hope anywhere he might find it. “Perhaps, even if he has, Drogon and Ghost are able to fight him off. They’ve been acting odd, yes, but we’ve all been off lately. They could just be feeding off our anxiety.”

She doesn’t believe it any more than he’d believed it when she’d tried to say the same thing at the start of their conversation.

“There is only one thing to do,” Daenerys tells him, her voice firm despite the tears lying thick over every syllable. “We have to leave King’s Landing. If I go, Drogon will follow. I can’t have him here. You’re right: the Three-Eyed Raven would have him torch the city the first opportunity he had. It’s what he wanted me to do originally, after all. I can’t risk it.”

It doesn’t solve anything. Not really. Jon’s main concern is still the same. “But he’ll still be with you.”

“He’s always going to be with me. Always. At least, if we go to Dragonstone, he’ll be away from our people. And Dragonstone, at least, could withstand dragonfire. It was built in part by Valyrian magic.”

The only Valyrian magic Jon knows of is her beauty, the way she makes him feel both in heart and body, the bond they share that feels as strong and solid as if it were itself living. That’s the only magic that is real to him—the only magic he would bet anything on.

“Valyrian magic notwithstanding, if the Three-Eyed Raven gains control of Drogon, he can simply have him turn and fly back to King’s Landing if he so wishes it,” Jon says gently. He sets his hand on her stomach and caresses over it with his thumb. His heart rises into his throat. “You’re in no state for travel, Dany.”

“Dragonstone is but a three-day trip by boat. I have months left,” she refutes stubbornly.

Some distant memory is tugging at Jon’s brain, but he’s having trouble placing it. Something he had seen in his dreams once, maybe. Something to do with a boat. Why can’t he grasp it? He only knows he doesn’t want her on one.

“It’s not the length of the journey I’m worried about. It’s the journey itself.”

“It’s hardly difficult.”

Jon shakes his head, adamant. “I don’t like it. I don’t think it’s a good idea. I think we should stay here.”

“And what about Drogon?”

“I don’t know. We’ll have to figure it out. But I don’t want you on a boat.”

“You seemed to like it the last time you had me on a boat. I’ve got proof.” She sets her hand over his. His heart jumps as he feels their daughter kick beneath his hand.

He’s not in the mood to banter with her. He’s distressed, though he can’t place why. For a moment, he fears the Three-Eyed Raven is messing with his mind again, but he realizes it’s that distant, out-of-reach memory he can’t place. It’s almost as if someone has gone in and removed the memory but left the spot it was in so that he knows it’s missing, but can’t locate it. It’s beyond frustrating.
“We should stay here as long as we’re able,” he insists, his voice grave. “We’ll keep a close eye on Drogon. If he acts in a way that makes us think he might be dangerous, we can go to Dragonstone, or find another solution. But we shouldn’t leave unless we have no other choice.” He thinks he’s done talking, but then he meets Ghost’s red eyes from across the room. His own eyes drift shut in pain at what must be said next. “And I don’t want Ghost at your side anymore.”

She’s quiet for a spell. Jon puts enough space between them on the bed so that he can lean over and press his lips to the highest peak of her stomach. Afterwards, he rests his face on her thighs, his arms looping loosely around her waist. He closes his eyes as her hand goes automatically to his hair. With his cheek pressed against the warmth of her stomach and her hands pulling through his hair, he feels his panic begin to slowly subside from the edges of his heart.

“I like Ghost by my side,” she admits finally, her voice breaking.

“I know,” Jon whispers. He kisses the underside of her stomach, his arms tightening around her waist. “I like him with you, too. But at least we would see Drogon coming. Ghost...he’s quiet. He can be lethal. I know how he is with you...he’s softer with you than I’ve ever seen him with anyone or anything. It’s difficult to imagine him hurting you when he sleeps at your feet, I know. But if he wasn’t in control of himself...” Jon squeezes his eyes shut tightly against the horrific image he has. He rubs his cheek absently against the fabric of her dress, relieved that, at least in this moment, his body is blocking their child from any harm that could come to her.

“What if we wait too long?” she asks him, her words stitched tight with fear. “What if it’s close to my time when Drogon starts acting oddly— what will we do then? Would you go to Dragonstone alone, take Drogon there alone?” Her hand stills in his hair. Jon moves his face back enough to look up at her. Her hair tumbles over her shoulders, a shining silver curtain, and he thinks to himself that there is nothing more beautiful in the entire world than her. It’s not the first time he’s had the thought, but he means it as much now as he has the prior times. “I can’t have her without you here.”

It’s not an option. Not even a thought. “You won’t. I’ll be at your side the entire time, no matter what. Nothing could keep me away. I’ll be with you the first time you see her.”

“The first time we see her.”

He smiles. Lying here, his cheek pressed so close to their daughter, he doesn’t find it difficult to imagine that moment. He remembers the perfect, heavy weight of Rickon in his arms the first time he cradled him— how honored he’d felt that his father had let him when Lady Catelyn had never let him when Bran was tiny. He remembers how soft the dark hair atop his head had been. He takes his memories of that and builds upon it, imagining the moment soon to come. With his eyes closed and his mind focused, he can nearly feel the perfect weight of his daughter in his arms. He can almost see her hair: a crown of downy-soft silver curls. He can almost see her resting on Dany’s chest, Dany’s like hair spread around them, a smile brighter than light itself upon her face. And his heart...he can almost feel the way it will grow to twice the size it is now. The pure, perfect joy he will feel as he holds his family in his arms.

It’s easy to imagine. Perhaps because, deep down, it’s all he’s ever wanted.

“I’m not in any hurry, but I can’t wait,” he admits. He knows Dany will understand the duality of that. He kisses her again. “Îivot,” he murmurs.

“Zaldrîžes-zokla,” she shoots back softly. He can hear her smile.

“Princess Rhaella,” he tries. Dany’s hand tightens in his hair for a moment as he caresses the underside of her stomach. He can tell it tickles, though she doesn’t laugh. “Princess Lyanna.
Princess…Zald…”

Her laugh is breezy. “Zaldrīžes-zokla.”

“Zaldrīžes-zokla,” he repeats. “It may be growing on me. Princess Daenerys?”

“No. There have been plenty.”

“Princess…Lyaella?”

He smiles against the fabric of her dress as he feels his daughter shift within her. Daenerys’s hand goes to her stomach reflexively, and Jon takes her hand into his, bringing her palm to his lips. He kisses the center of her palm, the inside of her wrist—his heart is heavy again, but for different reason now.

“Lyaella. How long have you been working on that one?”

He doesn’t answer. He turns his face in her lap and kisses her upper thigh instead, his chest filling quickly with a love so bursting it’s painful. He kisses her again, daring to move his lips further up, and she leans back on her hands in response.

“Are you trying to distract me?”

“Only if it’s working,” he answers, his fingers bunching the fabric of her dress. His heart has picked up, and he feels arousal tightening low in his gut. He’s not sure it’s not some sort of defense mechanism against all the sorrow and the anxiety, but it certainly feels true to form.

“It is.”

He smiles at that. It’s true that he can’t fix any of the things happening to them, but he can make her forget them. Even if only for a spell.

“Then yes, I am. Princess…Rhaeanna?”

“Sounds close to Rhaena. Rhaena Targaryen was the eldest daughter of Aenys Targaryen and Alyssa Velaryon. She rode Dreamfyre…” There’s a short pause—she makes a tiny sound at the back of her throat as Jon kisses her again, a sound that gets Jon entirely derailed. He shifts his focus to getting her out of her dress as quickly as possible so that he can continue unfettered, but he finds it more challenging than he’d expected: there seems to be an infinite number of heavy layers of crimson and black silk to contend with.

“They say Aegon the Conquerer cried the first time he held her. She was his first grandchild,” Daenerys continues, a bit breathless.

Jon can hardly remember what they were talking about. He’s so focused on exposing her skin, on pulling back the fabric holding him back from her. It takes him a moment to remember: Rhaena Targaryen.

“She must have been special to reduce Aegon the Conquerer to tears,” he says. He already knows, without a doubt, that he will cry the first time he holds their daughter. He has gotten teary on multiple occasions already, and he hasn’t even seen her yet. Hasn’t held her yet.

Dany lifts up on her hands slightly when Jon finally gets the heavy, slick skirts of her dress up to her hips.
“She certainly lived an interesting life…she once tried to have her husband’s c—”

Right as Jon’s pulling the soft layers of fabric all the way up, a knock sounds throughout the room, breaking off both his actions and Dany’s words. He and Dany groan in unison. His heart sinks to his toes, and for a moment, his disappoint turns to anger. He wants to swear at whoever has come to the door, threaten whoever has come to the door.

“I swear if that’s my Hand again…” she trails off darkly.

Sure enough, they hear Tyrion’s voice, interrupting them for the second time that day. “Your Graces, I need to speak to you at once.” Jon is furious: right as he’s about to stand and give voice to his frustration, Tyrion adds something else. “It’s about Bran.”

It has the same effect as being doused in ice water— perhaps more immediate. Jon rises from the bed after meeting Dany’s eyes. He holds his hands out for her to take, and once she has, he helps pull her to her feet. Her dress tumbles back down as she stands, a blur of red and black silk. It reminds him of their Targaryen banners flying in the wind; oddly, that thought makes him want to take her in his arms again and do his best to forget who is at their door and what they said.

But he can’t. They can’t. He takes her hand and follows her to the door. Jon is a bit taken aback to see his sister standing on the other side beside Tyrion. He’s not sure that’s a good mix— but he has little time to worry about it.

“Bran was trying to warn us about something,” Tyrion says at once. If he notices their flushed cheeks, it doesn’t show. “He kept saying ‘dragon’, and asking for you, Jon, and asking for you, Daenerys, and…what else did I forget?” Tyrion directs the question to Sansa.

“He mentioned Ghost,” Sansa adds.

“Yes, he mentioned Ghost. And said Lord Bloodraven is still here and that we must kill him— Lord Bloodraven, I mean.”

Jon’s heart sinks by the second. “What did he say about Drogon and Ghost?”

Dany’s fingers tighten around his.

“He couldn’t say much of anything. He can’t say more than a word or two at a time. I think it was a warning, though.”


“We will keep a close eye on both Drogon and Ghost until the Priestess arrives,” Dany orders.

“Your Grace—”

“Is it necessary for me to repeat myself yet again?”

Tyrion and Sansa exchange a subtly displeased look. Jon comes to Dany’s defense.

“We won’t solve anything by being rash. For all we know, the Three-Eyed Raven is trying to make us fear he’ll use Drogon so we’ll harm Drogon or lock him away. He’s our greatest weapon, after all. The greatest protection. Bran could have been trying to warn us of that.”

“I suppose,” Lord Tyrion says, unconvincing.
“We’ll watch them,” Jon repeats. “If things get out of hand…we will deal with it when it comes.”

How they will do that, though, remains to be seen. Jon only knows two things: Dany is not going to allow Drogon to be killed, and he does not want her leaving King’s Landing. That leaves little in the way of options.

Later, in the time they steal together before they have to be back in the council room for yet another matter, he thinks he might realize what bothers him about it. In many ways, if Dany makes that trip to Dragonstone, she’s retracing Queen Rhaella’s last steps. Rhaella Targaryen had fled to Dragonstone from King’s Landing while pregnant with her daughter, a son in tow. And what fate had befallen her there?

He’s never been an overly superstitious man. But even he feels a chill of foreboding wash over him.

And when his wife brings Dragonstone up again, right before they’re due to walk out the door, he grabs her hand and stops her.

“What good has happened at Dragonstone?” he asks, brow pursed in worry. Wanting her to see what he sees…even if he’s not even sure what that is himself.

“I was brought into the world, for one,” she answers smoothly. She arches a thin brow. “Or is that not considered a good thing?”

“It’s a great thing. But at what cost?” he asks, speaking obviously of Rhaella’s death. “You should be here. The maester has already got an army of midwives in line to assist the birth. He’s been stockpiling all the supplies and medicines we could ever need. What will we have on Dragonstone? Empty halls and ghosts?”

She touches his chin, caressing his beard. Her eyes are soft, but it’s a wounded softness, a bruise.

“Only death can pay for life,” she says, and if words have ever upset Jon as much in his life, he can’t recall. His reaction is physical and violent: he grows sick, and he reaches out, catching her hand in his and holding tight. Like someone’s trying to take her away. He feels as if they are.

“What is that supposed to mean?” he demands, disturbed and upset. “Dany. What does that mean?”

“It means that everything has its balance. Life has death. Fire has ice. Whatever bad comes, good will come at its heels.”

He stares at her, dumbfounded, wondering where this peace in her voice has come from. Wondering if maybe he’d been a bit too thorough with his attentions in the minutes that came before, when he’d finally bared her skin and kissed the parts of her he likes kissing most. He doesn’t think anyone should be as relaxed as she is when speaking of what she’s speaking of.

“I’m not losing you,” Jon tells her fiercely. Not even in exchange for our daughter.

“And I have no intention of being lost. If we go to Dragonstone, the maester’s medicines and midwives will come with us, as will he.” She steps into his embrace, her hands sliding down his back. “Childbirth should be the least of your worries right now. Let us focus on staying alive to get to the birth.”

His lips part. He nearly lets the remnants of those terrible visions tumble out. Nearly tells her exactly what the blood flowing out from his mother felt like on his hands when he was Rhaegar, how weak and pale Lyanna had looked in her crimson-bed, how helpless he as Rhaegar had felt as he watched her lifeblood flood out of her, a rushing river that he couldn’t stop with cloths, medicines, or prayers.
But he has built her up—he can’t tear her down now. What good is making her feel better if he upsets her not even a half-hour later? They need all the good moments they can hoard. Especially if what Jon thinks is happening to Drogon truly is.

“I suppose I should allow you to worry about the birth,” he says instead.

“Yes, that would be primarily my job,” she agrees lightly, smoothing her hands down his chest. One stills over the lowest of his scars before she steps away.

She starts to walk from the room, but he tightens his grip on her hand, stopping her. She looks back at him questioningly, and he goes to speak, but his words stick in his throat. He wants to say so many things all at once: they tangle together, push against each other, clog his thoughts. *I love you. Don’t let our hello be a goodbye. I love you. I don’t want to get on a boat. I’m frightened. I’m frightened. Why am I frightened?*

“What?” she asks softly. She turns back to him and loops her arms around his waist, but her stomach keeps her from standing as closely as she wants to. She reaches up instead and strokes his cheek.

“Nothing,” he manages. She touches his lips, her touch reverent. He smiles and kisses her fingers. “I love you.”

She smiles back. “That’s not ‘nothing’.”

“No,” he agrees, his heart rising up his throat. “It’s not.” He kisses the center of her palm and drops her hand. “All right. Let’s take our leave. Ser Davos has an agenda the length of my arm for us to go over.”

“Doesn’t he always?” she quips. She looks up at Jon, smiling softly. “I do care for him, though.”

Again, she goes to step out of their bedchambers. Again, he finds himself taking her hand, stopping her. Anxiety is twisted around his heart, pressing against his lungs. She looks back at him. Her hair, silver, glowing in the sunlight. Her eyes—amethysts. *We shall never see their like again,* he thinks, though he doesn’t know where it comes from, and the thought fills his chest with such inexplicable sorrow and dread that he can hardly bear it. He feels to walk out of this room is to die.

“Jon,” Dany says, growing concerned now. “Does your head hurt?”

“No.” It doesn’t. This time, it’s his heart. He forces himself to release her hand. Tells himself he’s being a fool. Takes a step from the chambers, holds his breath as she does the same.

“There you are,” Arya says, rounding the corner of the corridor right as they step out. “Everybody is waiting for you and nobody wanted to come tell you to hurry. Guess who has finally arrived.”

Jon looks at his sister, the pressure on his heart lessening. “The Red Priestess.”

“Her name is Kinvara. She’s been watching Tyrion Lannister try to crack jokes without so much as smiling once. Sansa keeps fake-laughing to be polite. It’s hilarious.”

Jon and Dany set off together with the same quickened pace. “Why didn’t you come get us at once?”

“She told us to leave you two be, and she says she talks to a god in the flames, so I didn’t feel like arguing with her.”

Jon thinks he understands why when he and Dany enter the council room. He’s taken aback by
Kinvara. Her beauty, of course—he isn’t blind. But more than that, it’s the peaceful power that surrounds her. She sits entirely at ease, and when she sees Jon and Dany, she stands, folding her hands in front of her, a serene smile in place. Arya was right about one thing; arguing with her would be pointless. The authority she emits makes that obvious.

“Daenerys Stormborn. Aegon Targaryen. I have been waiting to set eyes on you for many moons now.”

Jon feels uneasy at once. “Jon Snow,” he corrects. Aegon Targaryen feels like a set of borrowed armor too large to stay on—it doesn’t fit him right. It doesn’t feel like him.

“You are no bastard,” Kinvara answers at once. Jon senses the layers to that comment; she’s saying more than just affirming that he knows of his birth identity. “You are fire and blood, the blood of the dragon.”

“And a Stark,” Jon hears Sansa say.

Kinvara doesn’t even spare her a glance in response. Instead, she steps forward, and before Jon can say or do a thing, she sets her hands on Daenerys’s stomach. Strangely, Dany doesn’t flinch. It’s the first time she’s been able to stand someone other than Jon and Arya touching her stomach since what happened with Lord Bloodraven.

Kinvara’s smile is bright as flame. “A strong one,” she says, and Jon can’t help but smile, too. Dany’s smile is more radiant than everyone’s combined. “It won’t be long until she comes into this world.”

“I have two or three moonturns left,” Dany says, repeating what she’s been repeating for a fortnight now.

Kinvara smiles at her again, softer this time.

“She,” Jon notices, his heart rising quick in his chest. He smiles so wide he feels the ache in his cheekbones.

“She,” Kinvara affirms. She strokes Dany’s stomach softly. “But you knew that already, Daenerys.”

“Yes,” Daenerys agrees. “I knew from the start.”

“You know more things than you know you do. You always have. And so you know what must be done now, don’t you? Deep down, you know.”

Jon looks between the priestess and his wife, confused. He watches realization pass over his wife’s expression.

“Dragonstone.”

“Yes. Have you seen it in the flames, too?” Kinvara asks her.

Dany shakes her head. “No. At least—I don’t think I have. I don’t recall.”

“You may not. It is difficult to retain the visions unless you are properly trained. They will slip away like smoke.”

Everyone is confused. They haven’t had a conversation about Dragonstone with Dany as Jon has.

“I will be going to Dragonstone,” Dany answers in the Common Tongue. Silence falls over the small council.

“To…visit?” Lord Tyrion tries, his voice small and tense. “To show the child her history? Later on, when she is perhaps five or so?”

“No. In a fortnight, maybe less, maybe more.”

Sansa is looking at Daenerys like she’s suddenly turned into an actual dragon in the council room. Lord Tyrion rises to get more wine. Ser Davos frowns at Jon. And Arya stares.

“Okay, *that* sounds mad,” Arya voices.

Jon somehow hears his own voice over the pounding in his head. “Arya.”

“You’re all thinking it!”

“I’m thinking it,” Sansa agrees. “Tyrion, say something.”

“I don’t think any of my somethings are going to be sufficient.”

“Let us sit,” Kinvara says calmly. She takes Dany by the hand and pulls her towards the table. Dany looks back at Jon. He is able to unstick his feet from the floor and walk over to sit at her side, though he feels like he might vomit at any moment. *I don’t want this,* he thinks on an anxious loop. *I don’t want to go to Dragonstone.*

“Why do you think this is necessary?” Grey Worm asks Daenerys in Valyrian. He, at least, is still calm and peering at Daenerys as he always does: with trust.

“It’s our best chance. As long as I am here, the people are at risk. If the Three-Eyed Raven was able to gain control Drogon, Drogon would destroy everything. Everyone. If we are at Dragonstone, he will be better isolated,” Dany answers, still in Valyrian.

Only Jon, Grey Worm, Tyrion, and Kinvara understand what she’s said. Tyrion sets both hands on the table and peers seriously at Daenerys.

“Don’t do this. You’re in too fragile of a state to travel. We will figure out what to do about the Three-Eyed Raven. We don’t even know if he can control Drogon.” He looks at Kinvara. “Can Lord Bloodraven control a dragon?”

Jon assumes they’ve filled Kinvara in on all that has happened in their absence. She meets Tyrion’s eyes.

“I do not know,” she answers honestly.

“How does it work?” Sansa asks. “What do you know? Do you know how they can stop the Three-Eyed Raven? Do you know how to bring Bran back to full health?”

Jon never imagined he’d find himself in a conversation where he agrees with Sansa and Tyrion over Dany, but he does.

“I don’t want to go to Dragonstone,” he says. “I don’t think it’s a good idea.”
Kinvara isn’t shaken by his doubt. And, really, she should be: if anyone in that room could sway Dany, it would be him.

“It is what the Lord of Light wills,” she says calmly.

“And you know this how?” Ser Davos demands, speaking up for the first time. “Sending our queen, great with child, on a journey to Dragonstone for no reason does not seem wise. Especially when it brings us no closer to overcoming the Three-Eyed Raven.”

“But it does,” Kinvara counters. “This is what must happen to bring an end to the Great Other’s greatest servant. Without Lord Bloodraven and the Night King, the Great Other will no longer have any powerful agents on this earth. The Lord of Light will have ten.”

“Ten?” Arya echoes. “Who? Can’t we find these other people and work with them against the Three-Eyed Raven? With all of us, we can find a different way, one that doesn’t require putting Daenerys on a boat in the middle of a strange storm season. Have any of you listened to anything I’ve told you about what Gendry’s said about the weather? It’s a bad idea. Let’s call these others here to King’s Landing.”

“You’ll find that difficult to do. Three we can account for easily: Daenerys Stormborn, Aegon Targaryen, and the dragon Drogon. One, however, is still inside the queen’s womb. Two more have yet to be given life. Four others are stuck inside shell.”

Jon feels his heart leap and race within his chest, and then he feels Daenerys’s hand grip his thigh so tightly her nails dig into his skin through the rough fabric of his breeches. He finds himself wishing she’d squeeze harder, hard enough to draw blood; maybe then he’d be able to focus and process what the priestess just said. He can’t believe he heard what he thinks he did.

“Shell?” Lord Tyrion echoes, sitting straighter in his seat. He pushes his wine to the side, staring at Kinvara with rapt attention. “Are you saying…”

Arya’s eyes are wide. “More dragons,” is all she can seem to say.

But that’s not the part Jon is thinking of, and when he looks at Dany to find her already looking at him, he can tell it’s not what she’s focused on, either. He is startled to see tears shining in her hopeful eyes. It stirs him, though he can’t say why. Maybe it’s the thought of her carrying his child again (and again). Maybe it’s the realization that, somehow, they must pull through this, if she’s meant to have more children. Maybe it’s just the simple fact that they’re prophesied to be together for longer still. Part of him had feared…he had wondered….well, if the Lord of Light had brought him back so that the Princess Who Was Promised could be made, he had feared he would have no further use for him once she was here. But perhaps there’s more for him to do. He had once wished the Red Woman would have left him in that empty nothingness of death, but now, he’s desperate for as many days as he can covet. He wants thousands yet, and he wants to spend them with Dany.

“Where are these eggs?” Lord Tyrion demands, his voice rising with excitement. “If we had five dragons, we would have nothing to fear! What could the Three-Eyed Raven do then? He couldn’t get in the mind of five dragons at once.”

It’s Jon who understands this time. He sets his hand atop Dany’s, gripping it nearly as tightly as she’s still gripping his leg. He thinks they’ll both have bruises when they finally pull away.

“Dragonstone,” Jon says, his voice a bit stunned. He looks back at his wife. “Drogon…when he was gone…he came back covered in dirt and ash—”
“Yes,” Kinvara tells them simply.

They dissolve into a series of small conversations. Ser Davos and Grey Worm begin discussing what soldiers they might send to Dragonstone to locate the eggs, seemingly thinking this means Dany won’t have to go to Dragonstone now, though Jon’s not sure why they think that. Sansa and Arya are still thinking about the dragon eggs, too: Jon can hear their whispers easily.

“Can dragons reproduce on their own?” Sansa whispers to Arya.

“I don’t think so…maybe Jon’s dragon got Daenerys’s dragon pregnant,” she whispers back.

“Aren’t they both boy dragons?”

Arya shrugs.

“So that is how they’ll bring the Three-Eyed Raven’s downfall?” Ser Davos clarifies. “The dragons on Dragonstone?”

Kinvara folds her hands atop the table. “I do not know. All I know is that the eggs are there, Daenerys Stormborn will bring the dawn at the place of salt and smoke, and that I must journey parallel to you.”

“That leaves quite a lot of grey area,” Sansa says. Jon is thinking the same thing.

“I thought the baby was the Princess Who Was Promised. And journey parallel to them? What does that mean?” Tyrion asks.

“It means that I must also go to Dragonstone when you do, but I must travel on my own. The Lord of Light commands it, and as he commands, I do.”

“If all of this is true…if it is,” Ser Davos says, “I still see no logical reason why Queen Daenerys should go to Dragonstone. We can send men to find and retrieve the eggs, men to bring them back here.”

Kinvara peers hard at Ser Davos. “You are a skeptic, Ser.”

“If that’s what you call someone who needs reasons before sending a woman with child away from her home during a stressful time—a ye. I’m a skeptic.”

“In time, your eyes will open,” she tells Ser Davos. Jon reads his annoyance at that comment easily. “Daenerys must go to Dragonstone because the Lord of Light wills it. She must go because the prophecy cannot be completed without her.”

“Isn’t the baby—” Tyrion’s question is interrupted.

“Daenerys’s fate is tied to the child’s. I cannot say for certain which of them the prophecy refers to—not yet.”

Jon looks down at Dany to see how she’s taking all of this, but she hardly seems to be listening. She’s looking down at the table with a small smile on her face, her hand smoothing over her stomach. Jon reaches over and sets his hand by hers to see what she’s feeling. Their child’s movements feel stronger than ever.

“Dany,” he murmurs. She looks up at him, her smile evening out a bit, but her eyes are still shining with joy. “What do you think?”
“I think it’s all going to be okay,” she answers.

Jon smiles back at her and squeezes the hand atop her stomach gently, but he doesn’t feel anything close to reassured.

“How does one kill the Three-Eyed Raven?” Sansa asks. “Even a dragon— how does a dragon kill him? If he can jump from body to body and see the future.”

“Let me guess…you don’t know,” Arya says, sounding genuinely impolite. That tells Jon how deeply she doesn’t want this Dragonstone plan to pan out.

“That I do know, by the grace of R’hllor,” Kinvara answers. “The only way to kill Lord Bloodraven is to kill the form he’s inhabiting. But he must be fully inhabiting it— he must have his consciousness fully inside the mind of that creature— and he must not see it coming. He must not have time to withdraw and go to a different host. That is the only way.”

Jon shakes his head. “How do you take a being with a thousand and one eyes by surprise?”

“How indeed?” Kinvara muses. She turns to look at Sansa. Sansa stares back, confused. “Lady Stark, I believe you could answer this. How do you take an enemy by surprise?”

Sansa shakes her head. “I don’t know.”

“Certainly you do.”

“I don’t,” she insists. “How do you surprise an enemy like the Three-Eyed Raven? I don’t know. As I said before, he can see at least some of the future, though I never could determine how much of the future he could see—and it must be very mutable. To do something he doesn’t expect, you’d have to—” she stops. She glances once at Tyrion, and then looks back. “Well, you’d have to do what the enemy wants you to do. That’s what they won’t be expecting. But how does that help us?”

“How indeed?” she says again. “Truly, Lady Stark, I do not know. I only know what the Lord of Light wants me to know. The rest is speculation.”

“I care little for speculation, and I care little for risking the future of House Targaryen for a god who will not even give us complete answers,” Ser Davos says. “There is too much at stake here. Surely you see that, Priestess.”

“I see that there is too much at stake to not follow the Lord’s will. This is the only way. Of that, I am certain. I have seen darker flashes, warnings from the Lord of Light of what could be. I know, too, what has been done that must be undone, and the only way to undo it is by destroying the one who has fashioned himself the Three-Eyed Raven.”

Jon pins Kinvara’s gaze beneath his. “What is that? What has been done?”

She almost seems reluctant. That frightens Jon more than anything else has.

“It was uncertain whether or not I should share it,” she hedges.

“You’re going to share it,” Jon orders. “If it’s about Daenerys and our daughter, you’re going to share it.”

She turns her focus to Daenerys.

“What is it?” Daenerys asks her. Her voice is much calmer than Jon’s.
“There is some magic we do not partake in at the Red Temple. Dark blood sorcery we take no part in. That belongs to the Great Other; we have no place for his darkness. One such curse is a bloodtie. We abhor it. We believe in freedom, in release—we bind no one.”

Dany speaks first. “And what is this ‘bloodtie’?”

“Only very powerful, sinister sorcerers can successfully complete it. It is a blood-ritual of sorts. It requires the free-flowing blood of two people to mix, and on that occasion, dark magic binds one consciousness to another’s. It is not so much that two minds become one; rather, one mind tethers another. Where the tethered person goes, the consciousness of the one who cast the tether follows. There is no escaping it, and the tethered one can be found at any moment by the one who cast it, no matter where they hide or what they do.” Kinvara reaches across the table. She sets her hand on Dany’s. “I have reason to believe, through whispers I have heard in the flames, that Lord Bloodraven successfully bound your mind to his.”

Jon’s thoughts weave back and forth between the present and the past. He thinks of Dany singing *A Thousand Eyes, And One*. He sees her face crumbling now. He thinks of the There-Eyed Raven’s insistence that Dany get close enough to touch. He watches as Dany presses her hand over her mouth as if she might be sick. He remembers the Three-Eyed Raven’s parting words: “As long as you are with your child, so are my thousand and one eyes. That is what you give to her.”

And Dany’s bloody hair. He remembers that, too. Dany’s nails tearing at the Three-Eyed Raven’s hand—his nails tearing at her scalp. Both their blood, mixed and dried in her hair.

“Chained me to him, you mean,” Daenerys says, her voice hardly above a whisper. *The Breaker of Chains*, Jon thinks with a swell of nausea. That fact seems to disturb and upset her enough, but whatever she thinks of a moment later affects her worse. Jon watches as his wife recoils in horror, her head shaking slowly. She slides her chair back, retreating from something terrible Jon hasn’t yet realized.

“No,” she says, her voice choked. She sets her hand on her stomach. “No.”

“Oh,” Lord Tyrion says, his voice soft and sad.

“What?” Jon asks. He looks at Dany. At her quivering lips.

It comes to him the way all those horrible visions had: quick, intrusive—painful. The Three-Eyed Raven’s words: “A mother you’ve fashioned yourself, a mother you’ve longed to be. And you never will be."

“What is wrong?” Grey Worm demands.

Tyrion answers. “As long as Daenerys is with the baby, it will never be safe from the Three-Eyed Raven.”

“He could see us any time he wanted already,” Arya points out, her voice growing thick. She’s looking at Dany, and Jon’s surprised to see a thick layer of tears obscuring her eyes. “What makes this any different?”

“Unfortunately, it is very different,” Kinvara answers softly. “Before, it is my understanding that he could search out a specific person and observe them, but he was largely unsuccessful at taking over their minds from a distance with any real control. You saw that, Daenerys: he was able to affect you mentally, but he did not have the same control over you as he had with Jon in Winterfell, going by what I was told. He was only able to completely control that poor girl that worked in your kitchens
when he was here only a walk away from her. The bloodtie dissolves distance. It means he is always with you, as you yourself are always with you—it is a shortcut of sorts, both for locating you and getting fully into your mind. It enables him, too, to move back and forth to the minds of those around you with relative ease, as he deems fit. It takes much more power than what he was doing with Bran. It is insidious: his consciousness will always be with you, and he may, at will, overtake yours with his. Times we Priestesses have heard of this curse being used, it has always been used to commit horrible, perverse sins; it’s an abuse that goes beyond all abuse, subordination that goes beyond all subordination. It is truly terrible.”

Lord Tyrion is the first to break the silence that follows that. Jon slides his chair back so it’s level with Dany’s and takes her hand, but she hardly seems to notice that he has.

“So he hasn’t chosen another Bran. I was assuming…I was thinking we could locate the new Bran and kill them. What we should have done with Bran at the start…I was wrong. Forgive me, Daenerys. Once again, my counsel has failed you.”

Daenerys doesn’t seem to hear him, much less pay mind to his apologies. Jon is growing concerned quickly by how she’s frozen, her tears teetering on the edges of her lashes, her body tense as if she’s on the edge of sobbing but can’t take a step into that pain or a step back from it.

“Is…is Daenerys the new Bran?” Arya asks, her voice small, confused.

Jon’s eyes snap to Kinvara at that question. Everyone seems to be holding their breath. The air feels wrong in the room. Thinner, sparser.

“No. There is no new Bran,” Kinvara answers. Jon is relieved—for a short time. Then she continues. “He has no need for a longterm host body. He achieved what he needed to achieve within Bran’s body. He is free now.”

And Dany is not, Jon thinks, his throat stitching closed. It is too terrible for him to think about. Too terrible for him to process. He tightens his hand around Dany’s. When he looks at her, her breaths are shallow, ragged, and her hands are gripping her stomach so tightly her knuckles are white.

Jon stands at once. “Dany?”

She struggles to breathe, bringing everyone in the room to their feet in panic. Kinvara rushes over to her, kneeling beside her chair. Her thin hand presses to Dany’s stomach.

“Her womb is soft. It is not labor pain. Daenerys, breathe. You are panicking.”

“Of course she’s bloody panicking!” Arya snaps. “You’ve told her that fucking evil thing is inside her!”

It is more than that, though. Jon knows Daenerys well enough to see that. When she looks up at him, her tears finally fall from her lashes. They roll down her cheeks. Her first sob is little more than a gasp. Jon grasps her hands tightly and pulls her to her feet, clutching her body to his so tightly that he thinks he might be hurting her, but he can’t loosen his grip. He rocks her as they stand there, bones pressing into bones, their child kicking restlessly in her womb.

“You won’t have to leave her,” Jon whispers into her ear. He’s certain that’s what has her paralyzed with terror. “You won’t. I won’t let that happen.”

Her arms wrap around his neck, holding him so close it’s almost choking. Her nails dig into his shoulders.
“He’s going to make me kill her,” she gasps into Jon’s chest, and the weight of that realization is too much. She begins crying, every bit of strength drained from her. Her sobs are little more than broken gasps. It is the saddest sound Jon has ever heard.

“No,” Jon refutes softly, immediately, but what evidence does he have to back that up? For all he knows, that’s exactly what the Three-Eyed Raven is heading towards.

Arya’s voice is fierce on the surface, but Jon hears how it trembles beneath. “It doesn’t matter. This bloodtie doesn’t mean a bloody, damn thing! Because Daenerys is going to kill him. And when she kills him, he won’t be there anymore. Right?”

She shoots the question at Kinvara.

“The bloodtie dies with him,” she affirms. “That is why we must go to Dragonstone. The true future is still there in the flames, Daenerys: House Targaryen, ten strong. But to get it, we must fight for it, no matter the suffering or sacrifices to come.”

“No,” Daenerys says, at first just into Jon’s neck, but then she pulls back from his arms. She pulls herself to her full height, her face wet with tears, entire body shivering. “No! I am tired— I am tired of fighting! I have fought every moment of my life! Every moment! I have never been safe— I have never been free— I have never been able to fully rest, not now, not once! I don’t want to fight your god’s war for him! I’m tired! I’m done! I’m done, I’m done!”

Jon is uncertain for a moment whether she is going to strike Kinvara or fall back into his arms. The coin could land either way. He can’t breathe until she is back where she belongs, pressed to him, his kin. His heart.

“We can find a different solution,” Lord Tyrion says. Begs. Pleads. “There must be another way. Let her stay here. Tell your god to let her be.”

“It is not in my ability to tell the Lord of Light anything, nor do his choices always make sense to me. I must trust in them anyway. Daenerys, I am afraid you do not get to be done. Not until the Lord of Light is done with you.”

That upsets her even more. This time, when she steps towards Kinvara, Arya moves forward as if she thinks she might have to intervene. Dany’s steps are unsteady; she nearly falls, and to Jon’s surprise, it’s Sansa who shoots a hand out and steadies her.

“I am Daenerys Stormborn— a person! I am not a thing to be used! I am a person!”

“We are all the Lord’s people. He does with us what he sees fit. It is the way of it.”

Dany’s face contorts in rage. It reminds Jon of Ghost snarling. “Your god can step down here and take me if he wants me.”

Those words make Jon shiver. He is not the only one. Kinvara even appears affected, but hers is a different sort.

“The Lord of Light is not your enemy,” she warns. “I am not your enemy. The difficult things happening to you are the work of the Great Other.”

“They are not. They are not,” Daenerys snarls. “Had your Priestesses never prophesied this one who is promised, had your god never made my daughter this, had your god never meddled in my life, Lord Bloodraven would have no interest in me. No interest in my child.”
“And were that the case, you would not have your child. You would not have your dragons. You would not have Aegon Targaryen. It stands to be seen whether you or Aegon would even exist. We all have our roles to play. You said that once yourself. The Lord of Light is not hurting you. He is the one who is giving you the things you need to defeat your enemy. He is protecting you.”

“I do not feel protected! I feel confused—frightened—violated!”

“And I wish that were not the case. It is not for us to have complete understanding: that is the way of the Lord. We must trust and do what he wills.”

“Trust.” Daenerys laughs. There is no humor in it. It is cold. “I have never heard anything more absurd in my entire life.”

She takes another weaving step forward. Jon reaches out, catching her hand right as Arya takes her other one. Daenerys pulls away from both of them. She steps right up to Kinvara, so close her stomach presses to Kinvara’s. “I should trust the Lord of Light? The one who let almost everyone I ever loved die in front of me? The one who had Missandei beheaded in chains? The one who allowed Lord Bloodraven to get as close as he did? The one who took two of my dragons, my son? I wouldn’t be surprised if he takes my daughter, too. Uses her and then disposes of her as he’s done everybody else. That’s who I’m meant to trust?”

Her face is so close to Kinvara’s that they are sharing the same breath. When Kinvara moves to step back, Daenerys reaches up, grasping the back of her neck tightly, yanking her to a stop. For the first time, Daenerys appears terrifying. She doesn’t look like herself at all.

Kinvara falls still. Grey Worm edges closer to Daenerys, but Jon is not sure what he thinks he’s going to do to help.

Kinvara’s voice is quiet. Somehow, it’s still level and calm. “Are you quite sure, Daenerys, that these words are coming from you?”

“Yes!” she snaps, furious. But as Jon walks over to stand beside Kinvara so that he can see Dany’s face, he sees the way her expression crumbles. It goes from anger to confusion to sadness—she meets Jon’s eyes, horrified, and she quickly backs away from Kinvara. She shakes her head, her eyes filling once more with tears. Her hand goes to her head as if she’s been struck. “No. I’m not. I’m not. I’m not.”

She retreats to Jon, but he can do little to protect her. He crushes her to him anyway. He has to close his eyes against nausea; it takes all he has not to lean over and get sick all over the floor.

“It’s nothing that we cannot stop. Nothing that we cannot fix,” Kinvara answers.

“If he’s with her always, he has heard every word we’ve said in this room,” Sansa says. “He knows exactly what we’re planning. He knows we’re going to Dragonstone, he knows about the dragon eggs—he knows all of it. And it looks as if he’s already trying to get into Daenerys.”

“We do not know that,” Grey Worm snaps. “Queen Daenerys is upset. It does not mean she is being controlled.”

“Maybe not controlled—but manipulated, at the very least,” Sansa argues. “I don’t know her like any of you do, so I’ll ask you: have you ever seen her like that before?”

Nobody answers that. Jon tightens his arms around his wife. He thinks of the words that had weaved through his mind what feels like ages ago now. We will never see her like again. What was worse? The Three-Eyed Raven killing her in front of his eyes? Or the Three-Eyed Raven taking her away.
from him without ever taking her anywhere?

“It doesn’t matter if he’s been listening. We don’t even know what we’re planning!” Arya snaps. “Not once has this priestess told me anything of value— I don’t know how we’re going to kill him, when, with what—”

“Perhaps that’s the point.” Tyrion interjects. “Perhaps that’s why the Lord of Light has given so little.”

“If he’s given anything at all,” Ser Davos says. “How do we know this isn’t just Lord Bloodraven playing with us again? Tormenting us?”

“You will just have to take that on faith,” Kinvara answers.

Jon has his face hidden into Dany’s hair so he unsure what Ser Davos looks like, but he sounds angrier than Jon has ever heard.

“I’m inclined to agree with what the queen said. I have seen true evil committed in the name of your Lord of Light. Why shouldn’t I believe that Lord Bloodraven is his agent? Why shouldn’t I believe that he’s tormenting this girl— this girl who has been through every type of evil he could throw at her? She has walked through fire, and Jon Snow has taken a knife to the heart— what more does your god ask of them? What more? Leave them be. The queen is right: if he wants us to do his bidding, he can face us and tell us why.”

“Who are you to demand anything of the Lord?” Kinvara challenges.

“Who is your god to allow such suffering?” Ser Davos shoots back.

“My god is the god who liberates those from suffering. All the things you and Daenerys have mentioned are deeds from the Great Other. That is what we are fighting against.”

“Has it occurred to any of you that perhaps it would be wise for us to stop talking about this?!” Jon has never heard Sansa sounds so brash. “Perhaps he tried to get into her head just now because he realizes we are close to figuring something out. Let us not drive him further in.”

She’s right in at least one way: Jon is through talking about this as well. In that moment, he cares about nothing outside of Dany.

He moves her so that he’s holding her firmly to his side so that they may walk together, and then he sets for the door.

“Where are you going?” Tyrion demands, stunned.

Jon doesn’t spare him a second of attention. He merely holds Daenerys more securely and takes her from that room, from the confusion and the noise and the fear. It won’t help her, and he doesn’t care what any of them think. He only cares what Dany thinks. What Dany wants to do. She is the one whose body has become a battleground between the Great Other’s servant and the Princess Who Was Promised. The opinions of others matter little to him.

He takes her from the Maidenvault. She half-walks, half-stumbles, clutching to his arm the entire time. Jon hardly feels the ground beneath his feet as they walk across the courtyard. The newly-repaired greenhouse is alive with color at this time of day, but the bright glass brings no joy to him at all.

Once they’re alone in that sacred spot— a spot they’ve share countless happy moments— she bows
forward as well as she can with the immensity of her stomach, her face pressing into her hands. Jon rubs her back and doesn’t say anything for the longest time. When she is finally ready to speak, he finds it’s what he expected.

“We will go to Dragonstone,” she says dully. “I don’t know if I believe that we’ll be able to overcome anything there. But anything is better than sitting here and letting him rot my brain out of me. If I’m to die, I want to be Daenerys when I do.”

He thinks of her outburst in the council room. I’m tired. I’m done. I’m done. He knows that wasn’t entirely from the Three-Eyed Raven, if any of it was. His whole body aches for her.

“We don’t have to. We could ignore it all. We could stay here…it could all be a lie. It could all be a trick.”

“It’s not a trick. I wish that it were, but it’s not. You know that as well as I do.”

Jon looks down at her. Her eyes hold unimaginable pain where they had once held such joy.

“We don’t even know how to defeat him. Not really,” he reminds her. “All we know is that we will defeat him on Dragonstone. That tells us nothing of practical use.”

“If this Lord of Light wants it done for him, he’ll have to show us the way,” she says, her tone hateful as she says Lord of Light.

Jon doesn’t like the idea of getting on that boat without knowing the way ahead of time. Without knowing the plan, without preparing for it. But what other option do they have?

It’s my fault, he thinks, sick. If I had been stronger, I could have withstood what the Three-Eyed Raven did to me, and Dany wouldn’t have gone over to him. Had I chopped of his hands the time before that, he wouldn’t have been able to do what he did to her. Had I slit his throat that night in Winterfell, he wouldn’t have been able to do what he did to her. Had I given into the rage—the dragon—we would not be here right now.

Aegon Targaryen, Kinvara had called him. Perhaps that is who he has to be to get them through this.

“We do things your way from now on,” Jon says. “Fire and blood. Whatever we must.”

“Our way,” she corrects.

Was there ever any other way?

V.

In the sunlight, the dagger’s handle shimmers like the surface of the sea.

As Arya carefully polishes the blade, she watches the light shift and dance off the small bits of sapphire and ruby embedded in the handle, the light refracted in a thousand directions. It’s a fine weapon—beautiful. She never gets tired of looking at it. When Arya holds it, she can feel Gendry’s gratitude towards Queen Daenerys in every sharp edge and smooth curve.

As she continues cleaning the dagger, her sisters’ conversation drifts out onto the balcony.

“And will that be sufficient?” Daenerys asks.

“Yes. I’ve calculated that we will also be able to distribute a pouch of carrot seeds to each of the
enlisted participants. I’ve also found a way we can funnel excess funds from the plaza project to expedite repair to Maegor’s Holdfast—”

“No, I don’t want that,” Daenerys interrupts Sansa. “I want the plaza built. What is the progress on the people’s library and rookery?”

Sansa is slow to reply this time. Arya lifts her eyebrows as she begins polishing the dagger’s handle. Here comes another debate, she thinks. Sansa been here for a fortnight now, and though Daenerys has pulled her into the fold with admirable grace, she and Sansa disagree frequently. Sometimes, their debates are fairly entertaining, but mostly Arya just wants Sansa to shut up. Daenerys has enough to stress about without Sansa’s nitpicking, especially with the departure to Dragonstone arriving in only two days’ time. The preparation has been all-consuming and stressful.

“I told you how much the Citadel said they would charge to send Maesters here to train commonfolk to run a rookery. They clearly hate the idea—the price they gave Lord Tyrion was exorbitant. They don’t wish to share their secrets with peasants, nor do they believe the smallfolk should be able to communicate freely with those in other regions, and I have to say I agree with some of their reasons. They also take offense at the idea of putting a library in Flea Bottom. We don’t have the funds to move them.”

“We do have the funds. The crown crafted for me in Essos should net us plenty to negotiate with them. It’s of pure silver, black diamonds, and rubies, not to mention the intricate metalwork done on the dragons. I’ve asked you to sell it already.”

“Lord Tyrion doesn’t want you to sell your crown. He wants you to wear it.”

“I care little what Lord Tyrion wishes when it comes to that crown. He insisted I wear it on my wedding day, and I did not, and the sky did not fall. What good is it here in a wooden box when I could use it to get the gold needed to better King’s Landing?” Arya hears the sound of a trunk slamming shut. She guesses Sansa and Daenerys have finished folding and packing the last of the queen’s clothing. “Sell my crown.”

“Can I at least make sure there aren’t other places to find the gold before we do that?”


“It’s bad luck. Haven’t you heard the saying? ‘A king who sells his crown surrenders his soul?’”

“I’m sure that’s meant to be taken figuratively. I understand that this kingdom looks nothing like what you imagine it should, but I was not raised in a castle, and in my experience, nurturing those who rely on you is more important than any finery. My mother’s crown once kept my brother and me from starving. Mine can help feed the minds of my people.”

Arya hears the door of the queen and king’s chambers wheeze open. She leans forward on the bench, peeking into the room to see who it is. Jon enters, his tired arms full of rolled maps, purple-black circles prominent beneath his eyes.

“Jon,” Sansa says at once, in the same tone she used when she used to tattle on Arya and Bran. “Daenerys shouldn’t sell her crown. Do you agree?”

Jon drops the heavy scrolls on the table near the fireplace. He shoots Sansa an impatient look.

“It doesn’t matter what I think. It’s her crown. If she wants to sell it, sell the damn thing,” he mutters, unrolling one of the maps.
“But it’s bad luck—”

“Frankly, Sansa, I don’t give a damn about any crown right now, and I know Dany doesn’t either. Shut up about it and do as she’s asked.”

Arya lifts her eyebrows, torn between being impressed at her brother’s ferocity and taken aback by his foul mood. His anxiety has clearly riddled his patience with holes; it’s much weaker for it.

“What do you think the lords and ladies will think when they hear Queen Daenerys has fled King’s Landing and sold her crown on top of it? It sounds like a surrender. It sounds like giving up. It sounds like you don’t intend on coming back.”

“Sansa,” Jon says, his words tight. He slams his hand down on the tabletop as the map begins to roll itself back up, forcing it flat again. “What did Daenerys ask you to do? Daenerys, what do you want her to do?”

“She knows what I want. I want my crown sold and I want the gold used to build a rookery and a library in Flea Bottom.”

Jon has both hands pressed to the tabletop now, his head bowed over the unrolled map.

“So do the fucking thing,” he growls at Sansa. “Your queen gave you an order, now follow it.”

Arya lifts her eyebrows at his tone. She’s suddenly glad she’s not in the room with them: Jon is a bit frightening like that. Arya, now finished cleaning the dagger, tucks it into the silver scabbard lovingly, careful not to smudge its shine. She withdraws Needle after that, setting about cleaning it while she’s already got the supplies out.

Sansa finally replies, breaking the silence that followed Jon’s outburst.

“You shouldn’t talk to me like that, Jon. It’s not proper.”

“And it’s not proper for you to be arguing with the queen. Sell it.”

“We weren’t arguing—we were discussing! And it’s a stupid thing to do,” Sansa persists. “The people will think—”

Jon slams his fist down on the table so forcefully that the vibration of the blow travels through the stone floor beneath them. Arya jumps a bit at the unexpected boom!

“Get out,” Jon orders. There’s a pause, and then he repeats himself, his voice dark. “Get. Out.”

Arya sets Needle beside her on the bench and scoots forward so that she can see Sansa. She is, as she expected, very wounded by his tone. She sweeps towards the door, her auburn hair flowing after her.

“Thank you, Sansa,” Daenerys says softly.

Sansa’s only just shut the door when Jon says: “And what are we thanking her for?”

“She’s done great work with my planting project. You were too harsh with her.”

“Too harsh with her? I still don’t think she should be involved in any of our small council matters, much less operating as Master of Coin—”

“She’s not our Master of Coin. She’s only helping Tyrion with some of his duties.”
“She would have had you killed months ago given the chance—”

“Sansa and I have reached an understanding. This is her only second chance, and she knows that.” There’s a pause. “We have to have people here while we’re gone. We’ve done too much to let it slip into chaos.”

“Yes, we do. Yet why should we choose the woman who rebelled within the first few weeks of your rule?”

“She and Lord Tyrion work well together. He hasn’t had a drink in a fortnight.”

“And I’m sure they’ll work splendidly together as they sabotage us from the inside.”

“Ser Davos will be here, but even if he wasn’t, they wouldn’t do that. And Yara Greyjoy is coming to join the council temporarily, as is Lord Gendry and Prince Quentyn of Dorne. Sansa will have no real power to do any real harm: everything she decides must go through the entire council.” There’s a short, soft pause. “Come here.”

Arya begins to worry they’ve forgotten she’s on the balcony. She kicks her feet against a metal potted plant near the bench on purpose, but thankfully, the queen merely means to hold Arya’s brother. Still, Arya slides back to the other end of the bench where she can no longer see into the chambers.

“You need sleep, Jon,” Daenerys says.

“We’ve got too much to do to prepare. You know the covered pit I saw on that damaged map? I found these of Dragonstone— this map here makes it look like that pit may be large enough to house Drogon, if we must.”

The queen is unable to say anything back to that. Arya’s heart grows heavy in her chest. It’s bad enough that Ghost has been locked away— she can’t imagine that magnificent, beautiful dragon being crammed into some dank pit and locked away. And for every pang of sadness she feels at the thought, she knows Daenerys feels a thousand times as many.

“How are you with your packing?” Jon asks. “How can I help you?”

“It’s nearly complete. Arya’s cleaning the dagger— that’s one of the last things left to pack.”

Arya re-sheaths Needle and hops down from the bench. She grabs the dagger and heads back into the chambers, feeling as if she’d be eavesdropping if she stayed out there when she was technically done with her task. She passes the dagger to Daenerys. While Daenerys turns to put it into her trunk, Arya reaches up and gently pokes underneath Jon’s right eye.

“You look horrible.”

“Thank you.”

“I mean it. Daenerys is right. You need to sleep.”

She knows why he hasn’t been. He’s been lying awake watching over the queen in case the Three-Eyed Raven tries to go into her mind as she dreams. I won’t let him to do her what he did to me, Jon had told Arya, adamant. Arya couldn’t sway him on that.

“You could sleep now. I’m in here,” Arya tells him quietly. “I’ll wake you if something is wrong. I’ll know if it is.”
He looks at the table. “The maps—”

“Will still be here when you wake,” Daenerys interrupts. “I won’t let anybody steal them. You have my word.”

When his eyes dart to the bed, Arya knows he’s given in. She nods at Longclaw.

“Give me that and I’ll go clean it while you rest.”

He doesn’t argue. He removes Longclaw and passes it to Arya. She knows he’s only resting with the promise that Arya will be here to watch over Daenerys, so she doesn’t leave the chambers completely, but she goes to the furthest corner of the balcony, where she can’t see into the bedchambers at all. She can still hear, though, and she tries her best to block out Daenerys and Jon’s whispers and the sound of periodic kisses. She thinks they must be resting together, though she doubts Daenerys will actually sleep.

It’s hardly been any time at all when the queen joins her on the balcony. The silk of her ruby dress is a bit rumpled from lying on the bed. Arya moves Longclaw to the side so that the queen can sit beside her. Right after she sits, she grimaces, her hands moving to press near her hips.

“What’s wrong?” Arya asks, forcing her voice to remain neutral.

“It’s okay,” the queen answers reflexively. It’s not really an answer at all; Arya waits stubbornly until she explains further. “The baby’s just in an uncomfortable position. There’s a lot of pressure.”

Arya relaxes. “I’m sure she’ll move into a less painful position soon. She’s always moving.”

The queen’s smile is tight. “Yes, I'm sure she will.”

Arya doesn’t understand the silence that falls over them. It feels sad. She can’t make sense of it, and it makes her heart feel leaden.

“I’m glad Jon’s getting some sleep,” Arya comments, wanting to break through whatever has fallen over them.

“He needed it. It’s my fault. He’s been up well into the night watching over me.” Her expression twists with guilt, with shame.

“That’s not your fault,” Arya says at once, turning to face Daenerys. “You didn’t ask for any of this.”

“That changes little,” she says. She pulls at the skirts of her dress, straightening the wrinkled fabric over her massive stomach. Arya can’t tell for sure whether she’s tired or sad, but something isn’t right in her eyes. Then again, nothing had been right in a long while. “I think I will go lie down, too. This bench doesn’t relieve my discomfort much.”

“The baby’s being stubborn,” Arya says. She sets her hand atop Daenerys’s stomach. “Move, Visenya.”

It does what Arya hoped: Daenerys laughs.

“I’m not calling her Visenya,” she reminds Arya.

“Fine, but it’s a missed opportunity.”

Dany pokes the back of Arya’s hand teasingly.
“You can have a daughter and name her Visenya. I’ve got something else in mind for mine.”

“I can’t. It’s a Targaryen name.” There were certainly no rules denying it, but it didn’t feel right to Arya. Not when there was a little girl who could be Visenya Targaryen in full.

“And what of it? I give you permission to one day use it,” Daenerys says. She reaches out and sets a hand on Arya’s shoulder. Arya grasps her elbow and helps steady her as she rises slowly to her feet. The ascent appears painful. “Yes— the bench was not a clever seating choice.”

“Go rest,” Arya urges.

She holds her hand out. “Come with me?”

Arya can’t help but laugh. “I’m not the giggling, whispering, bed-sharing type of friend,” Arya says. “Sansa’s who you want. She might even let you braid her hair.”

“No, she’s not. You’re my friend. My sister.”

Arya’s deeply flattered. She tries to temper the way those words affect her heart, lest she get upset. Lately, her emotions have been raw: she is more worried about what’s to come than she could ever voice to anyone. She’s so afraid of what might happen, what she might lose. She’s tired of losing people.

Maybe that’s why she stands, her hand sinking into the queen’s. Or maybe it’s because the tired sadness in the queen’s eyes matches the tired sadness seeping into her own heart. Or maybe it’s just because part of her fears she will never again get the chance to be close to this person she has come to love. She tries to remember the last time her father held her, the last time Robb kissed her forehead, the last time her mother had stroked her hair. The last time she’d kissed Rickon’s chubby cheek. Had she known those times would be the last time, she would have cherished every second. She would have remembered.

She should feel strange about lying in the king and queen’s bed— especially with both of them in it — but she doesn’t. She curls on her side on the leftmost side of the bed, Dany in the middle, Jon fast asleep on the right. The only light in the room is the sunlight filtering through the lace curtains; the breeze makes the curtains appear to inhale and exhale, and with each breath, the light shifts across their faces. As it slants over the queen’s features, she reminds Arya so strongly of an illustration of Rhaenys Targaryen from one of her childhood books that she has to look at her twice.

Daenerys’s hand is small and warm as she takes Arya’s, threading their fingers together. Their hands rest between them. For a moment, nothing is said. The queen just looks at her, and Arya looks back. Arya’s heart only grows heavier.

“I’m glad you’re here with me, Arya,” Daenerys whispers. “And I’m glad you’ll be with me on Dragonstone.”

Arya can’t tell anymore whether she feels sad or just affectionate. It’s all a tangle of pressure on her heart, a narrowing in her throat. She finds herself stroking the back of the queen’s hand with her thumb.

“Me too,” she says.

Daenerys smiles. Her eyes close soon after, though Arya can tell she’s not going to sleep. Thinking, maybe.

“Jon and I want to call her Lyaella.”
Arya smiles, her eyes dropping to Daenerys’s stomach. She mulls over that name for a beat, pondering each syllable and the way it will sound on the tongues of the people. Princess Lyaella.

“I prefer Visenya, but I think Lyaella suits her,” she decides quietly.

“Visenya is yours. You have every bit her warrior’s soul, and should you one day have a daughter, she will embody the best of it.”

A thousand praises from a thousand kings couldn’t mean more than that one compliment does. If Arya were still a little girl, she thinks she would start giggling and never stop, so pleased she’d be.

“Thank you,” she says genuinely.

But the queen’s smile has burned away. Arya hadn’t even seen the flames that disintegrated it. They must have been lurking in her thoughts.

“Warriors sometimes must do terrible things.” Her words—soft so that they don’t wake Jon—make the hair on the back of Arya’s neck rise. “Strength can be terrible.”

She doesn’t know what to say to that because she doesn’t understand where those words came from or what they mean. Daenerys pulls gently on her hand, dragging it over and pressing it to her stomach. Arya thinks nothing of it; she feels her niece kick and move all the time, and in fact, she is the only person other than Jon who gets to. But when she realizes Daenerys’s hand is trembling against hers, she becomes worried.

“What is it?” she asks quietly. She meets her eyes and watches as the shifting light makes them go from violet to indigo to lilac, changing as the sunbeams sway over her face. “What do you mean?”

Daenerys—my sister, she thinks, the words ringing true in her heart—parts her lips, but nothing comes out for a short stretch of time. She struggles with it, and Arya can’t do anything to help. She doesn’t know what to say to that because she doesn’t understand where those words came from or what they mean. Daenerys pulls gently on her hand, dragging it over and pressing it to her stomach. Arya thinks nothing of it; she feels her niece kick and move all the time, and in fact, she is the only person other than Jon who gets to. But when she realizes Daenerys’s hand is trembling against hers, she becomes worried.

“What is it?” she asks quietly. She meets her eyes and watches as the shifting light makes them go from violet to indigo to lilac, changing as the sunbeams sway over her face. “What do you mean?”

Daenerys—my sister, she thinks, the words ringing true in her heart—parts her lips, but nothing comes out for a short stretch of time. She struggles with it, and Arya can’t do anything to help.

The corners of her mouth press down; she tries to stop it, but then her lips tremble, the sadness overtaking her. Arya slides closer to her.

“He’s going to make me hurt her, Arya,” she whispers. “I know it. I can feel him in me—I can feel him at the edges of my thoughts, like something’s pressed into me that shouldn’t be there—I want to tear my own hair out and rip into my own head to cut him out, but I can’t. He’s going to make me kill her.”

It had occurred to Arya that Lord Bloodraven could indeed be planning that, but how can she look into Daenerys’s eyes and affirm that? How can she say that to her when she loves Lyaella so much? When all she’s wanted all this time is to just protect her daughter and keep her safe?

“You won’t do that. You never could…”

The queen reaches out suddenly, taking Arya’s face into her hands. Arya’s breath catches in her throat in surprise; the tears shimmering in Daenerys’s eyes unnerve her.

“You mustn’t let me,” she whispers fiercely, her hold firm. “You must stay at my side no matter what, and if he gets into my head—if I can’t fight him back—if I seem likely to hurt her…you must stop me.”

It is clear what she means. Arya’s stomach drops as if she’s fallen from some great height.

“No,” she says at once, horrified. She pushes Daenerys’s hands away. “How could you even ask
“Who else would I ask? Who else do I trust as much?”

As special as she’d made Arya feel before, Arya feels horrible now.

“I won’t do it,” Arya insists, her voice weak. Suddenly, taking a life seems the most impossible thing in the world—the heaviest burden a person could carry. How many people has she killed by now? She can’t recall. But right then, those deaths are nothing more than whispers from an old life: they don’t feel real. Not in the way that this does. “I couldn’t.”

“Of course I can’t make you. I would never make you even if I could. But I trust you.”

“You trust me to kill you,” Arya snaps. I never want to kill anyone again, Arya thinks suddenly, the pain she feels at the thought of this so crippling and dark she can hardly breathe through the pain of it. “This is cruel. You’re being cruel to me. I never thought you were cruel.”

She’s a bit too loud—Jon’s breathing stutters a bit in his sleep, and both she and Daenerys look over at him. They freeze until his breathing evens again.

Daenerys is visibly wounded by Arya’s words, but Arya knows she has done little to sway her decision. She moves closer, and Arya—tears brimming in her eyes—wants to push her away, but when she reaches to hold her, she reaches for her, too. Her forehead presses against the cool silk of her dress—it soothes the pounding in her head, her blood racing hot as fire in her veins. Daenerys strokes her hair like Catelyn used to do, and suddenly, Arya’s clutching her as tightly as she can, and tears are climbing up her throat at such a pace she has no hope of suppressing them.

“You’re cruel,” she says again, and then she starts crying. When was the last time she truly cried in someone’s arms? She can’t recall. She had forgotten how it feels—like a dam bursting open within her chest. Like the blood being wrung out from her heart.

Is she crying because she can’t do what the queen is asking of her?
Or is she crying because, deep down, she knows that she could?

“I don’t know what else to do,” Daenerys says into Arya’s shoulder, her own words tangled with tears. “I have to protect her, Arya. Even from myself. But I can’t control myself. I need help. Please, Arya, I’ve never needed help more in my entire life. I’m so scared— I’ve never been so scared. Please, I need you. I need you. Promise you’ll protect her, please…please.”

A dark thought edges into Arya’s mind. It’s nearly impossible to consider the possibility now, with her arms around Arya, her tears seeping into Arya’s neck, more vulnerable than Arya has ever seen her, but she has to ask.

“How do I know you’re not being manipulated into asking me this? How do I know Lord Bloodraven isn’t just trying to make me do what he was trying to make Jon do? How do I know that this request is your own?”

That question upsets Daenerys more than everything else has combined. She weeps, the sound heartwrenching and hopeless, the kind of sound that would render anyone desperate. Arya pets her hair, kisses her hair— anything to try and make it stop, but it doesn’t.

“You can’t know. Nobody can. Don’t you see, Arya— he’s taken everything from me. Nobody trusts anything I say anymore. And you’re all going to tiptoe around me, and he’s going to win, and he’s going to make me kill my own daughter, and then he’s going to rip my brain apart— is that how I’m to die? With my daughter’s blood on my hands? Without one thought of my own in my head? Let me die with someone I love holding my hand. Let me die with my daughter safe from me. Let me die when I can still think of the ones I have loved…don’t let him do this to me, please. If you care for me at all, you will give me this mercy…please, Arya…” her words disintegrate into tears.

If it is truly Lord Bloodraven speaking through her, all hope is lost. Arya can’t imagine a fiercer enemy. A crueler one.

If it is truly Lord Bloodraven speaking through her, he’s won. Because she cannot deny Daenerys Targaryen this mercy.

“If he manages to take you over…if he tries to make you kill Lyaella…I will protect her,” Arya whispers. No words have ever made her feel so conflicted, so dirty.

“However you must. No matter what,” Daenerys begs.

Arya’s heart is pounding in her chest.

“No matter what,” Arya amends, her words hardly audible.

When she looks again at Jon, still deeply asleep, she feels as if it’s him she’s already killed. Kinslayer, she hears, and the voice is her father’s. Betrayer. Kingslayer. You are no Stark.

Exhausted from her tears, she drifts to sleep in the silence that follows, the queen’s arms still wrapped around her. In her dreams, she holds her father’s hands. His are cold as ice. Then what am I?, she begs of him. What am I?

He turns to a male thrice his age, taller with long white hair, a mark like a splash of red wine across his cheek and neck. His eyes are red as Ghost’s. When he speaks, his voice is Jon’s.

A killer.
The audience chamber is surrounded by a winding queue of uneasy people.

“Forgive my curiosity, Your Grace, but where will you go?”

The young Flea Bottom woman is not the first person that day to pose that question. Their soldiers began loading up their ship at dawn in preparation for their journey in two day’s time, and the commonfolk quickly realized all the items being towed to the ship were coming out of the Maidenvault. When Lord Gendry and Prince Quentyn arrived and the maester began choosing which midwives could (and would) journey with them, a few quickly realized what this must mean. Word spread rapidly after that, and Jon and Daenerys found themselves quelling a hundred different anxieties from an uncountable number of people while their own anxieties festered silently in their own chests.

“There is nothing to forgive; curiosity is not a transgression. We will be going to Dragonstone,” Daenerys answers. She scrounges up a warm, reassuring smile— from where, Jon has no idea. “We will return in no time at all. Things will be managed by our small council in our absence. Ser Davos will be here in this chamber daily should you need anything while we’re away.”

The young woman doesn’t seem comforted by that. She looks uneasily at the queen for a moment longer, and then looks at Jon.

“Should we worry?” she asks him. He thinks it’s an odd question, but the answer comes to him immediately anyway: yes.

“Worry about what? Everything will be taken care of while we are away. There is nothing to worry about.”

She looks between Jon and Daenerys.
“We’re fearful of another war,” she tells them. “My tutor at the scholarhouse says she heard you’re leaving for your own safety. That men with the faces of metal birds are coming over by the shipload from Essos.”

Jon exchanges a mild look with Daenerys. They turn back to her afterwards.

“There is no need to worry about rumors such as those,” Daenerys reassures her.

“We’re going to Dragonstone because it’s our ancestral seat. We want our child born there,” Jon lies.

“The comforts of home,” Dany adds. But at the word *home*, all Jon can think of is their cramped bedchambers in the Maidenvault. He doesn’t think of Winterfell or Dragonstone. And he knows, from the way Dany’s lips turn down at the corners once the young woman has taken her leave after being given further reassurances, that she feels the same. They will be very far from the comforts of home when their child comes into this world.

Yet these days, even home brings no true comfort. Jon feels hunted and haunted everywhere he goes, even in their bed, a place that had once been his only true respite. He’s tortured every night with a fear stronger than his sleep deprivation; all he can do is lie beside Daenerys and watch over her, pretending that he would be able to do something to help if Lord Bloodraven chose to torment her in her dreams. Pretending that he has some control, some ability to protect his wife and his baby. He knows it’s a lie he tells himself, and that knowledge creates the nausea that rots his insides from dawn ’til dusk, and then from dusk ’til dawn.

And sometimes, hatred and anger rot his insides, too. Sometimes they consume him. He thinks of what is being done to Dany— every insidious layer to it, every perverse violation— and he can do little but burn. He tries to keep it quiet, tries to press the fury down deep so that Dany might not see it; she has enough to worry about and spends too much time fretting over him as it is. But at times, it’s an ire that can’t be suppressed. He finds himself snapping at Sansa, at Lord Tyrion, at Grey Worm, at Arya, at Ser Davos— even at Dany. The latter is the worst: it’s a vile offense against his own heart, a weak abuse towards his own desires. With all his heart, all he wants is to protect Dany and comfort her, and yet, at times, he finds himself making things worse for her.

It’s then that things seem the darkest. And though he knows he’s only human, though he knows he’s sleep-deprived, though he knows the pressure he is under is insurmountable, it is difficult for him to forgive himself for even the smallest slights.

They speak with those begging audience until Jon notices how quiet Dany’s become. He looks over at her at once, completely blocking out the man currently speaking to him. Her lips are twisted in a slight grimace; she shifts uncomfortably in the chair and crosses and uncrosses her ankles a few times. Jon leans towards her, his hand settling on her thigh, everybody else in the audience chamber forgotten.

“What is it?” he asks.

She opens her eyes and meets his. “I don’t think I can sit here any longer,” she admits.

The wooden chairs they use in the audience chamber are uncomfortable even for Jon, so he can’t imagine how uncomfortable she is. She said yesterday that Lyaella was favoring a position so low that it felt like she was pressing into her pubic bone. The pressure and weight of their baby was so great, Dany said, that she kept feeling pins and needles in her legs, and a deep aching in her pelvis. Jon had suggested that she remain in bed until their departure, but she’d been insistent upon coming to the audience chamber at least one more time.
Now that they have, Jon can’t see any reason why she shouldn’t go rest. And, if he’s being honest, he wants nothing more than to rest with her. Maybe, he thinks, Arya will come sit in the room so that I can sleep, too. Just for an hour...just an hour. He would have given any amount of gold for just that one hour of rest with Dany. And he almost thinks they’ll get it for a moment. Dany agrees to go back to their bedchambers, and they both head towards the staircase, but their plans are intercepted.

“Your Graces,” Ser Davos greets, stopping them at the first step. “Queen Yara has arrived. Arya and Lord Gendry are receiving them at the gates; they’ll be here to meet us in the council room shortly.”

Dany leans into Jon’s side. He wraps an arm around her waist, trying to support her enough to maybe alleviate some of the pressure on her hips.

“Thank you, Ser Davos,” Daenerys says, her voice hollow. She steps from Jon’s arm and reaches for the staircase bannister. Jon feels Ser Davos’s eyes on him as he nervously watches Dany’s painstaking ascent up the stairs. When she makes it to the top safely, he turns to face Ser Davos.

“Yes?” he asks.

There are few people in the world that he respects as much as he respects Ser Davos, but his next words frustrate Jon deeply.

“I am advising this for the hundredth time: do not go to Dragonstone, Your Grace. I’m worried for her. I’m worried for you. I’m worried for the babe. I don’t trust that priestess at all, and I think you are making a mistake. Stay here—we’ll find a way to beat this.”

“And how do you propose I change the queen’s mind?” Jon snaps. “I don’t feel any better about than you do, but she doesn’t know what else to do. Kinvara said we’ll somehow find a way to defeat Lord Bloodraven on Dragonstone, and that’s the only hope she’s got. The only hope we’ve got.”

He wants to explain to Ser Davos how dark things have gotten for them, how frightened they are, how Jon feels on the edge of crying or shouting every moment of every day. But even if he spent hours weaving a picture of that darkness, Ser Davos still wouldn’t understand the depth of it.

“Plead with her. Beg her,” Ser Davos implores. “Appeal to her heart. It’s your unique power.”

Jon shakes his head. “I can’t ask her to stay here unless I can see a way she can survive here. And I don’t.” Jon turns to go up the stairs, but he hesitates, turning back to face Ser Davos to add one more thing. “She can feel him in her head. She says it’s almost like something’s been buried in her skull—something physical she can feel that shouldn’t be there. Her head hurts terribly at least once every day. And sometimes....sometimes she says things, Ser Davos. Things that just aren’t her.” He blinks against the searing at the back of his eyes and looks down, taking a moment to rub over his eyes and breathe. He looks back up at Ser Davos afterwards. “I don’t know if Dragonstone is the answer, and she doesn’t, either. But it’s the only thing we’ve got to try.” He starts his climb up the stairs, calling his parting words down as he does. “I’ll see you in the council room. I shouldn’t leave her alone.”

He takes the steps two at a time and tries not to fear what he might see when he opens their door.

II.

The rest of the day is spent in the council room. Dusk arrives well before they’re anywhere close to departing for bed. Jon and Daenerys go over everything they want accomplished in their absence, every contingency the small council might face, and what feels like hundreds of questions. It’s not something to be rushed, no matter how uncomfortable Dany appears or how tired Jon is; they have to make sure everyone is on the same page about what their duties will be in the coming months so that
their kingdom will continue to flourish unimpeded. That means outlining the precise number of rolls that should be baked daily for each specific food tent, the amount of gold that should be funneled towards the medicines used in the sickhouses, and what the proper timeline is for a trial regarding any and every possible offense someone could commit, as well as what punishments are deemed just for each crime.

By the time they all stand to go their separate ways, they’re past-due for a meal. They all journey to the front hall, but Jon is so preoccupied with monitoring his wife’s forlorn expression and her lack of appetite that he hardly tastes his food. He’s not the only one who notices it, either, but Arya and Yara’s multiple attempts to pull Daenerys into their conversation fall flat. Even Sansa is more sociable, though she mostly talks to Lord Tyrion and Prince Quentyn. It’s better than Dany, who talks to no one. Not even Jon.

He holds her hand as they walk up the stairs towards their bedchambers, but he doubts she even notices that he is. They undress for bed, and for a bit, Dany just sits on the edge of the mattress, moonlight glowing on her bare skin. She’s as still and quiet as untouched snow. Jon reaches across the mattress and grazes the small of her back with his fingertips. Gentle—imploring.

“Come here,” he requests, unable to take her sadness a moment longer.

She is slow to slide over to him, her stomach acting as an anchor on the soft surface, but when she finally lays in his arms, he feels her. She feels there—she feels like Dany. Relief flows through him. It’s so strong he can’t do anything but clutch her close for a while, no words sufficient.

“What’s happening in there?” he asks her, his lips pressing softly to her forehead. There is her mind, and nothing frightens Jon as much as the thought of her losing it.

She doesn’t answer straightaway. She drags her fingertips down his spine, notch by notch, her breath warm and gentle against his chest. Every now and then, he feels her eyelashes flutter against his skin.

“Struggle,” she whispers finally. “Fear.”

He must’ve expected that, so why does her answer make his stomach sink, his heart plummet? Why does it make his eyes burn?

“I want to help,” he breathes. Pleads. “How can I help?”

“This helps,” she assures him. She finds the scar over his heart and kisses it softly three times. From where her stomach is pressed to him, he feels Lyaella kick hard. He reaches a hand between them and touches Dany’s jaw, guiding her face up so that he can kiss her, his other hand pressing over Lyaella’s kicks. Daenerys’s hands caress up and down his back, eventually finding his bun and pulling his hair free. He shivers slightly as her fingers pull through his curls, and with his mouth still pressed to hers, he slides his hand up from her stomach, gently cupping her swollen breast. He feels what he was looking for: her heart, steady and beating beneath his hand. Her pulse, thrumming beneath the softness of her breast. It’s still there. Still pumping. Because she’s still here—she’s still in his arms—she’s still her—she’s warm, and beautiful, and alive, and he loves her so much that he can’t bear it—

He deepens their kiss. He’s sliding his hand between her thighs when she suddenly reaches down, gently catching his hand in hers, stopping him. She breaks her lips from his, and for a moment, they simply breathe and look at each other. Jon’s stomach is in tight knots.

“I don’t want to,” she whispers. Her fingers tremble around his. She pulls his hand out from between
her thighs and lifts it up, pressing the back of it to her lips. Her kiss feels apologetic, and when she speaks next, her words tremble as her fingers do. “It’s not that I don’t want you. I do, you know I do. I just…” she trails off, unable to finish.

Jon’s emotions are twisted and snarled around one another. There’s guilt mingled in with disappointment, fear threaded through agony. He pulls his other hand off her breast, away from the reassurance of her heartbeat.

“No,” she tells him softly. She releases the hand held to her lips and reaches for his other hand, dragging it back up, molding it back over her heart. “That’s okay. I don’t mean I don’t want you to touch me at all, I just…I don’t want…I don’t want to be…” she trails off faintly. He realizes she’s frightened, and that makes him feel sick. Frightened of him? “Do you understand?” she asks. And then: “Is that all right?”

“No. Not you.”

He almost can’t bear to ask it because he knows, if she says yes, it will devastate him. Of all his fears, Dany being frightened of him is one of the strongest. It’s a fear that stems from all those months he’d been forced to live in the heads of their male ancestors who were doing exactly those sorts of things to their wives— and many other terrible things, too. He couldn’t live with the knowledge that Dany thought him capable of those things. Maybe, a small, fearful voice in his head says, Lord Bloodraven has put thoughts in her head, things to make her afraid of me.

“No. Not you.”

Jon feels her heart rate increase beneath his palm. He brings his forehead to hers. He understands now. “Him.”

“Yes,” she breathes. “Of what he might do if I'm that vulnerable...in my head, or in yours. And I don’t want him to feel what I feel. Jon, I don’t him to feel you inside me. That’s mine to feel— I can’t stand the thought of it, of him being in my head, of him feeling what I do, seeing what I do…of him…” she can’t seem to finish her thought, but Jon thinks he understands anyway. And none of it is very shocking to him. They haven’t made love once since Kinvara arrived, and while he assumed it was mostly due to her physical discomfort with her progressing pregnancy and his own exhaustion, he knew that the knowledge of the bloodtie had to have something to do with it. He knows Dany is aware of the violation every moment of every day, and he finds it hard to forget about, too.

Sometimes, when Dany is doing her hair in front of the looking glass, he feels the urge to wrap her dressing gown around her body, so sick at the thought of Lord Bloodraven being in her head and ogling her naked reflection. What Dany is speaking of now would just be a deeper invasion. No, he corrects himself. The deepest invasion.

Lying there, feeling her tremble in his arms, he thinks he could easily let his rage bloom within his chest. The wrongness of it makes him want to step out onto the balcony and scream endlessly into the night. What he wants more than anything else is to torture Lord Bloodraven— that’s what he’s decided over the past fortnight. He had thought, at first, that beheading him would suffice, but with every chain Lord Bloodraven adds to Dany, with every joy he takes from her life, Jon becomes more and more of the idea that he must die from pain and pain alone. How badly would you have to hurt someone for them to die of pain? Jon wonders. There must be a fine line, too— cause too much pain and hurt them too badly, and they’ll die from that injury. How could you cause immense suffering without ending life immediately?
Currently, he’s been favoring an idea that certainly wouldn’t work in practice, but brings him a sick relief to imagine anyway. He thinks of slowly freezing Lord Bloodraven nearly to death, and then stringing him up above a fire and roasting him just until his skin begins to blister, and then re-submerging him in ice, and then stringing him up again, over and over…

Of course, he can’t torture anyone who doesn’t have a body. And right now, Lord Bloodraven is frequenting the last body in the world Jon would ever bring harm to.

“It won’t be like this forever,” Jon murmurs to Dany, his lips pressing gently to her hair. “We’re going to get rid of him. I swear it.”

“I won’t live like this forever.”

At first, he thinks she’s agreeing with him. But he realizes she’s correcting him. He closes his eyes, seized at once by terror, and they’re quiet as he obsessively counts her heartbeats in his head. One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten…

He doesn’t have to ask her what she means by that. He knows. With her, he always knows.

III.

The morning of their departure, Jon pays one last visit to Bran.

“He’s close to death,” the maester warns Jon as he leads him through the sickhouse towards Bran’s room. “He won’t take food. He’ll drink water and consume herbed honey, but a man can’t live on that for long.”

Jon’s mind trips and stumbles over that word. Man. Is that what his little brother is now? A man? The thought makes Jon want to cry. If it’s true that he’s a man, he’d grown into manhood chained in the corners of his own mind. Alone. Without anyone to guide him. Jon could have guided him. And now, he never will.

Jon has been here a couple times over the past two weeks. The first two times, he found it hard to look at Bran without feeling angry. He had to keep reminding himself that Bran was Bran— not Lord Bloodraven, not the Three-Eyed Raven. Gradually, Bran started to look more recognizable. As he got smaller and frailer, he began to look more and more like Bran the last time Jon had seen him. And now, when Jon steps in today, he feels no anger at all at the sight of him. He just feels sad.

He sits beside Bran on the bed, reaching out to take one of his waxy, cold hands. He could be dead if it weren’t for the slight rise of his chest every couple of seconds. Jon holds his hand between both of his, and as soon as the maester steps from the room, he speaks.

“I’m sorry I couldn’t protect you. I’m sorry I wasn’t there when you needed me most. I’m sorry for what has happened to you— for the things that were stolen from you. Most of all, I’m sorry that you’ll never get the chance to live. I’m sorry, Bran.”

He feels Longclaw dig into his hip as he leans over to press his lips to his brother’s forehead. When he pulls back, his eyes snag on the long, thin scar running across his throat. The scar he’d put there.

“I’m sorry,” he says again, hoarse. There’s a dry ache behind his eyes. “I wish…”

He trails off. Where should he even start? He wishes so many things were different. He wishes he’d known about Lord Bloodraven the first time he saw Bran again. He wishes he could have helped him then.
He knows he needs to rise. Dany’s bathing and dressing to depart, and as soon as she’s done, he’ll need to go with her to attend to a series of last-minute tasks before they board the ship. But he thinks this is probably the last time he’ll see his brother, the last time he’ll hold his hand in his. The last time he’ll get to speak with him. And he knows it’s likely that Bran is already lost to the world and can’t hear or understand a word…but how could he live with himself if he didn’t speak to him? Didn’t take this chance to tell him the things he wanted to share before he left this world?

“I’m going to be a father soon. The maester’s measurements give my wife a moonturn and a half now until her time. Perhaps a bit more, maybe a bit less—it isn’t exact. When it comes to being a father, I’m more excited than anything else. It’s funny—you’d think I’d be nervous, seeing as I never strictly imagined I’d ever father any children. But I love my daughter already, Bran. It’s shocking and wonderful how you can love somebody so much that you’ve never even met. I’m scared, too, but not about being a father. I’m scared that something will happen to Daenerys. That’s my wife—I don’t know how much you remember about what’s happened, Sansa made it sound as if you didn’t remember much. I married Daenys Targaryen, she is—was—the last Targaryen. She’s the Mad King’s daughter…Queen Rhaella’s daughter. We met on Dragonstone; I came to forge an alliance, to seek her help with the Night King, and she saved me. And saved me again…and again…and again. She killed Cersei. The Lannisters aren’t on the Throne any longer. Dany and I are.”

Jon looks down at Bran’s hands. With a pang to his heart, he spots a familiar scar on his left index finger. He’d hooked himself by accident when they were fishing once, with Robb and Father. He’d weathered the pain with strength beyond his years, hardly flinching as Father eased the hook back out. I want to try again, he’d said afterwards, stubborn and brave. I can catch one. I just know I can.

He never managed to, but Jon caught one for him, and he rode tall and proud on his horse afterwards, that fish swinging back and forth in the burlap bag tied to the saddle. When they’d returned to Winterfell, Bran immediately took the fish to Lady Catelyn. Look, Mother, he’d said proudly, and Jon had felt the strangest tangle of happiness and sorrow as he watched Catelyn Stark crush Bran into her embrace, her pride and love as loud as the rushing river Jon had caught that fish in. He had been happy for Bran at the same time he’d been sad for himself. He wonders if Bran feels that way now, listening to Jon tell him about his life. His future.

“I’m not a bastard either. Father was never untrue to your mother. Lyanna was my mother, and Rhaegar Targaryen my father. My true name is Aegon Targaryen. All my life, all I ever wanted was a true name. But when I discovered that I had one, it was a difficult thing to come to terms with. It was quite a long while until I could consider myself a Targaryen; it felt like a lie, like I was being an imposter. I felt like my entire life was a lie, that I was a lie. I had built myself as Jon Snow…Aegon Targaryen just felt like some other child who had been born, not like me. In so many ways, my entire identity was also a lie—that was difficult to work through. I’m still not done with it. I may never be. But I understand why Father did what he did, and I respect him for it. It’s difficult to keep the secret that he kept for so long. I learned that the hard way.”

He falls quiet. As he’s about to rise, he sees Bran’s scarred index finger twitch slightly. Not much—not enough to say he meant to do it, not enough to say he was still in there somewhere. But enough to keep Jon sitting there. Enough to make the foolish part of Jon wonder if maybe Bran was asking him to stay. Enough to make him hope.

He gives into that foolish hope, and he stays.

“I never felt like a Targaryen ’til I married my wife. I’m sure there’s a lot to be said for that—quite a few sly comments Sansa would like to make—but it’s the truth. When I’m with her, I feel that sameness. That belonging. It feels, in many ways, like it’s her and me against the world. We’re the
last Targaryens, and we belong together. We’re of the same blood—and I like everything about that, and everything about her. It’s what I was afraid to admit to myself for so long, but I no longer care. I have no shame about who I choose to be anymore. That feels more freeing than shedding Snow would feel, though I don’t care so much for getting rid of Snow now. Jon Snow is who I was when I came back to life, when I got my second chance to have the life I have now. When I made a family of my own.” Bran had once been such a big part of Jon’s first family, the family he grew up with. His heart aches. “I wish that you could come back to us, Bran. There will always be a place that is yours.”

He holds his brother’s hands and works up the courage to leave. It’s hard to walk away knowing it’s the last time. It’s hard to look upon his face and know he’ll never look upon it again once he walks from this room. It’s hard to know that, soon, he won’t have a brother at all anymore.

When he finally gets the nerve to look away from Bran and let go of his hands, he stands. He turns to leave without looking back at him again. Goodbye, he thinks, but he doesn’t say it. If he were to say it, he’d cry.

“I’ll see you soon,” he says instead. “Sleep well.”

He’s at the door when he hears a jagged inhalation, followed by the creaking of the bed. He stops and turns, his breaths stilling in his throat. Bran’s eyes are still closed, but his hand moves across the blanket—towards Jon.

“Jon,” he croaks. It’s pleading. Jon crosses back over to him in only three long strides, falling to sit at the edge of the bed again. He takes Bran’s outstretched hand. He can sense in his weak, desperate grip that he has been holding on for whatever he’s about to say. All Jon can do for him now is give him peace.

“I’m here. I’m right here. You can tell me now. What do you need to say to me, Bran?”

Bran tightens his hold on Jon’s hand as much as he can, which is hardly any. He is visibly struggling against something in his mind: Jon doesn’t know if it’s death, sleep, or the Three-Eyed Raven. All he can do for either of those things is wait, and so that’s what he does.

“Silver,” Bran finally insists, the word falling urgently from his lips. His brows are furrowed in pain, his skin pale. With great effort, he manages: “Daenerys.”

“Yes,” Jon affirms, his pulse picking up. “What about her, Bran?”

His head moves from side to side on the pillow—a agony. Jon’s hands flounder above him, unsure how to help, knowing he can’t. Bran seems unable to get out what he needs to say; it appears he needs to speak as long as Jon did to say all he needs to, but he just can’t.

“In…her— He—” he trails off, his head lolling slowly to the side. Jon thinks he’s gone for a moment, but then he stirs again, scraping up whatever scraps of strength remain.

“We know about the bloodtie,” Jon tells him, assuming that’s what Bran means. “Is that what you mean?”

“She…you must…”

Jon waits, his breaths knotted together and strung up in his throat. He doesn’t move.

“Let her go,” Bran begs. He pulls feebly on Jon’s hands. Jon meets his eyes, denial flooding his brain. Bran doesn’t mean what he thinks. He means something different. He just has to wait…has to
“Let her go where?” Jon presses. He hears the edge of panic to his own words, feels the weight pressing on his lungs, and that frightens him. He’s not saying that, Jon tells his body. Stop panicking.

“Let her go,” Bran repeats, the words heaving from his lips.

“Go where?” Jon demands. “Dragonstone? We are. We are going. I don’t understand, Bran—”

“It’s okay. It’s okay…”

“It’s not! It’s not okay! None of this is okay! Nothing!” The words burst from Jon, sharp with panicked edges. “Bran, I don’t know what to do…I don’t know.”

Bran holds his hands tighter. “You do know,” he says, and Jon feels terror grip his insides before he fully processes the words. His thoughts spin back to Winterfell easily. “You know, Jon. You were born knowing. Targaryen men have always known what to do with Targaryen women. They’ve always found a place for them, a purpose. You know that well. You know what to do with her, with Daenerys. You’ve seen it every night.”

He slides off the bed at once, his hand falling to Longclaw. He studies Bran— he can’t tell. He doesn’t know. He can’t tell who this is. Is this his dying little brother or his enemy?

“Those are Lord Bloodraven’s words,” Jon says, his fingers clenching tighter around the pommel of his sword.

Bran’s face contorts in pain again; this time, he cries out, the wail of pain turning into whimpering. Jon doesn’t know if he’s being tricked or not, but that sound freezes him in place, fear and pain restraining his own mind.

Bran’s eyes suddenly open. They are haunted, wide, sunken.

“I can’t—I can’t—I can’t—I can’t— Silver— you must— you must— you must— Jon, help— help— you must—help me— help me—”

Jon shakes his head, unwilling to go any closer. “I can’t help you. I don’t even know who you are.”

“Bran…Bran! Bran! I’m Bran!” The words burst from him, each a cry of their own. He reaches for Jon, but Jon doesn’t take his hand off Longclaw. He ignores the way his own eyes are burning. “Jon — you must—…” it’s as if he’s suddenly found a word he’s been looking for, a way to explain something he couldn’t before explain. His desperate eyes chase Jon’s gaze, and once Jon is looking him in the eye, he begs: “Ramsay— like Ramsay—”

Jon’s prepared to slit the Three-Eyed Raven’s throat right then. It has to be him. Bran would never say something like that.

“I must be Ramsay?!” he spits, disgusted, enraged. He thinks back to two nights ago— I don’t want to. Is that all right? He feels like he could cry at the memory of the way her hands shook. His own hand begins to shake atop Longclaw, Rhaella’s shrieks bouncing off the walls of his mind. Never, he thinks, his stomach twisted inside out. Never. I would rather die.

“No— no—!” Bran insists, frustrated. “Not that! No! Jon— listen!”

For a second, he sounds so shrill it makes Jon think of Lady Catelyn. He sounds just like her. It’s
odd enough to draw Jon out of his own panicked thoughts and back to their conversation.

“Ramsay…weapon…dogs—”

Jon feels they’re engaged in the world’s stupidest guessing game, one parents would force bored children to play during long journeys. If he’s ever felt so frustrated, he can’t recall.

“What? Ghost? Is Ghost going to hurt Dany?”

“No!” Bran screams, and Jon’s so taken aback by the intensity of his anger that he peers at his brother in surprise. Bran is trembling harder than ever now, his eyes wet with tears, his hands fisted around the sheets. “Ramsay! Ramsay! Ramsay! His weapon! His own! RAMSAY! You must— let him— she must—”

His face falls abruptly, going from a concentrated, pained look of determination to one of abject terror. He pulls at the sheets desperately almost as if he’s trying to drag himself back away from some approaching terror.

“No! No! No!” he pleads, “No…no…”

The fight leaves him all at once. His eyes close, his fingers release the sheets, his head lolls to the side. The strings around Jon’s heart are cut—it crashes to his toes. He walks over and grasps Bran’s face. “Bran. I still don’t understand. Bran!”

He shakes him over and over again. He begs. He splashes him with water from the cup at his bedside. Nothing pulls him back.

Jon tears at his own hair as he looks down at him, still as death. He’s full of regret, guilt. I should’ve asked better questions, he thinks. I should have brought someone else with me. I don’t even remember all he’s said…how can I figure out what he means?

When he leaves Bran’s room, he asks a healer for a bit of paper and ink, intending on sitting in the sickhouse and writing down everything he remembers so he can give it to Sansa and Tyrion. If anyone will know what Bran meant about Ramsay, it’ll be Sansa.

But as he’s taking the paper and ink from the healer, he sees a familiar person weaving towards him. He’s not expecting to see her here: it automatically draws him up short, concerned.

“Yes?” Jon asks his wife’s handmaiden.

Ezhi stops in front of Jon, but she doesn’t answer straightaway. Her eyes flash to the healer standing right beside them.

“Thank you, you may take your leave,” Jon tells the healer firmly.

As soon as the healer has walked to the far end of the room, Ezhi steps closer to Jon.

“Can you come with me?” she asks him quietly, her Common Tongue heavily accented but easy enough to understand.

Jon’s fingers tighten around the paper in his hands. “What’s wrong, Ezhi?”

She shakes her head, her dark hair flying around her as she does.

“I do not know,” she whispers, and the confusion in her eyes frightens Jon. He nods and sets towards the door. She follows beside him. They walk at a pace so brisk that quite a few commonfolk
look at them in concern. Once they’re in the Maidenvault’s courtyard, and less likely to be overheard, Jon looks down at Ezhi.

“Did you leave her alone?” She shouldn’t be alone. That’s one of the only things he knows with any certainty.

“No, Haji is with her,” she answers. “First that was strange was she wanted very chilled water for her bath. Khaleesi doesn’t like cold water.”

“No,” Jon agrees. When she wasn’t so far along, he had often taken his baths with her, both of them curled close in the bathing tub. Even when she insisted the water was unpleasantly lukewarm, to Jon, it was scalding. “Was she hurting? Maybe she thought the cold water would help.”

“She doesn’t say,” Ezhi answers, troubled. “She won’t get out of the water— it’s so cold she shakes, but she keep telling us she’s burning up. But her head— it’s cold, she is not with fever.” She looks up at him again. “I’m sorry for stopping you, but I do not know what to do other than to get you. I looked for Arya, but I couldn’t find her.”

“You did the right thing,” Jon assures her, his pace increasing. “You should always get me if you’re worried about her. Get me first. No matter what I’m doing.”

“Yes, Your Grace,” she promises.

Sansa and Tyrion are in the front hall of the Maidenvault. Jon hears both call out to him, but he ignores them, bolting up the stairs as quickly as he can. He hears them follow after— he turns to Blue Fly, stationed outside the bathing room.

“No one follows me.”

Blue Fly nods firmly in response. It’s not just the fact that Dany’s bathing that makes Jon insistent upon no one else coming in: it’s that he doesn’t know what is happening in her mind, and he feels it isn’t right for anyone else to see her that way. She wouldn’t want that. She’s already had all her privacy stripped from her; Jon can’t let anymore be taken in any other way.

Haji meets them at the door. She’s wringing her hands and worrying her bottom lip. She murmurs to Ezhi in Dothraki. Jon steps around the women and heads towards the copper tub. He can see the back of Dany’s head, her hair wet and shining in the light. He stands beside the tub, his fingers curling around the edge of it. He can feel the coolness emitting off the water even from that distance. He looks down at Dany, and she meets his eyes; hers are dazed, tired. Her lips are more lavender than rose. She’s up to her neck in the cold water, and beneath it, Jon sees her entire body shaking. He dips his fingers into the water. It’s painfully cold, even to him; the bones in his fingers ache soon after submerging them. How long has she been sitting in it? He reaches forward and touches her cheek. She’s never felt so cold to him. He feels as if his insides have been doused in the water she’s sitting in.

“You need to get out, Dany. It’s too cold,” he says. He grips the edge of the tub again and kneels beside it. “Why would you want to sit in that? Is your back still hurting?”

The water rocks gently within the tub as she withdraws her hand. Her fingers are trembling ice against Jon’s. He turns his hand over and grips hers tightly.

“I was burning. It was so hot,” she tells him. “This feels better. It feels good.”

Her smile is sleepy, calm. Jon’s blood races fast in his veins in fear.
“You can’t stay in here. You’ve got to get out. Here— give me your hands, I’ll help you out.” He rises and holds his other hand out, seeking Dany’s other hand as well. He still holds her left.

She shakes her head. “No, I will stay. Just a bit longer.”

“No,” Jon repeats, firmer this time. His heart clenches as he looks into her eyes again. Something is disconnected there, and it renders him momentarily speechless in fear. He has to force himself through it. “It’s too cold. Come on. Give me your hand.”

“No,” she repeats, her brows drawing down, her hand pulling from his.

He sinks to his knees again. His voice is pleading. “I’m asking you to please get out of the tub.”

“And I’m telling you no, I don’t want to.”

They stare at each other. Jon doesn’t want to reach in and grab her, doesn’t want to pull her out against her will. She knows that, too.

He turns to Ezhi. “Could you go get the maester?” Maybe it’s not as cold as he thinks it is. He’s certainly swam in water icier than that and he was fine. Maybe it’s fine for her to sit there as long as she wants. He wants it to be— he doesn’t want to fight with her.

Ezhi turns at once, hurrying from the bathing room. Jon reaches into the tub and touches Dany’s shoulder gently, drawing her gaze back to his.

“You’re not cold?” he asks her gently.

“No, I feel good.”

“Then why are you shaking like that?” Jon asks. “Why do you look so cold?”

“I’m not shaking,” she tells him. She smiles again. When she reaches up with a quivering hand and touches his cheek, he nearly cringes away, her touch icy. “I feel good.”

Jon softly takes her trembling hand in his. He kisses it, and then he holds it there at his lips, so that Dany can see her own hand shaking. “Look,” he tells her. “Don’t you see it?”

Her smile falters. After staring at her hand for a moment, she pulls her eyes from his and looks down at her own body beneath the water as if she’s only just realized where she is. She lifts a trembling arm, staring at it. She looks back up at him, and this time, Jon sees confusion and horror in her eyes.

“I don’t feel cold,” she repeats, but this time it’s in a small, frightened voice.

“What if Lyaella is?” he whispers, where only they can hear.

Her hand slips over her wet skin, settling at once on the peak of her stomach. Only a second later, she holds both hands out towards Jon. He exhales in relief and stands, taking her hands in his. He holds her securely and helps her stand. As soon as she’s upright, she begins shaking harder. Her teeth are chattering as she reaches for Jon; he ignores Haji as she approaches with bath linens, taking Dany in his arms and holding her as she steps out of the tub. She clings to him, burrowing into him, and he wraps his crimson cloak around the both of them. It’s made of Southern fabric, light and cool, so it offers little in the way of warmth, but Jon doesn’t want to pull away from her. Instead, he looks at Haji and nods towards Dany, and she thankfully understands. Jon and Daenerys stand together as she drapes one towel around Dany’s shoulders, over Jon’s cloak, and begins gently toweling her wet hair with the other one.
His cloak soaks through and his jerkin and tunic grow damp, but he doesn’t step away. She shivers without cessation. It makes Jon think about being North with her, about showing her the waterfall. *Keep your queen warm,* she’d said, and Jon thinks about how happy she’d looked— how radiant, how beautiful. *We could stay a thousand years. No one would ever find us.* They should have. He wishes they had. But even a thousand years wouldn’t shield them from a thousand and one eyes.

The maester arrives then. Jon separates from Daenerys long enough for him to look over her.

“You need to warm up, Your Grace,” he tells Dany. “Go sit in front of a fire and drink something warm. Why were you taking such a cold bath?”

Dany stares at him, unable to answer. Jon’s certain she has no idea.

“Her back hurt,” Jon lies. He doesn’t want anyone knowing what’s going on inside her head. He’s afraid they’ll call her mad. “Ezhi, can you start a fire in our chambers?”

She nods and steps from the room. The maester meets Jon’s eyes. Jon can tell he doesn’t quite believe what he’d said about her reasons for the cold bath. He wonders if that’s why he addresses Jon next, rather than addressing Dany.

“She’s Grace should be in bed resting as often as possible until her time,” he advises. “I fear all this stress will sour her health. Her mother—”

“Queen Daenerys is not Queen Rhaella,” Jon interrupts. He doesn’t want to hear again about Rhaella’s stillbirths, early births, miscarriages, dead children; that’s not going to help lessen their stress. “Thank you, Maester Olken.”

A hearty fire is crackling in the hearth when they return to their chambers. Dany wraps a blanket around her shoulders and sits at the end of the bed while Jon changes out of his wet clothing. Once redressed, he joins her. She’s watching the flames, but she leans against him when he sits, her wet hair warming a damp circle into his tunic sleeve. He kisses the place a crown should lay; she smells different to him, less like the rose oil she uses and more metallic, but he supposes it has something to do with the cold water.

“Are you still cold?”

“No.”

He lifts his cheek from her hair and looks down at her. Her eyes are closed, her face clear. He takes that to mean she’s feeling better than she had, that she’s *her* again. He can breathe easier at that thought, but the terror lingers at the edges of his mind. She’d come back to him this time, she’d won this time. But what about the next?

He’s glad when she lies back on the bed. He agrees with Maester Olken in at least one way: he thinks she should be resting far more than she is. Yesterday, she’d been particularly restless, walking anywhere and everywhere, tending to things that could wait until they returned, checking on things she’d already checked on twice before. She refolded all the baby gowns and blankets in Lyella’s trunk three times. *They’re not going to get any better folded than that,* Arya had said, her voice just a touch too uneasy to be amused. *I just need to do it,* Dany had insisted, and so Jon and Arya had helped her shake out the folded items and refold them for the third time. Jon had noticed she’d taken to doing a lot of things in threes when she was particularly restless or uneasy, though he had little idea why. She would kiss him three times in a row mornings after a particularly bad night, say *goodnight* three times before going to sleep on nights she was terrified of her dreams, say *I love you* three times after he woke her from nightmares. He didn’t ask why; he just accepted her tripled
love and accepted whatever made her feel reassured. He liked to tell himself she did to remind herself of who they are -- the three heads of the dragon. To give herself strength.

There’s no sign of that restlessness right now. If anything, she appears drained. And as he lays beside her and takes her into his arms, he realizes he’s drained, too.

“What happened in the bath?” he asks her. “Did you know you asked for chilled water?”

She nods. “I felt like I was on fire. I just kept thinking *I have to cool down, I have to cool down.* And it didn’t feel as cold as it was, not even close. It wasn’t cold at all until you showed me how my hand was shaking. I don’t know what happened, Jon. I’m frightened.”

Jon thinks it’s not so much what actually happened as the realization that something had happened. The Three-Eyed Raven been able to influence her mind enough to get her to follow through all the steps it took to get her to the moment where she was in a cold bath for long enough to lower her body temperature, long enough to purple her lips and make her shake. He must’ve had sway over her mind for at least a half-hour to achieve that. What else could he make her do in a half-hour?

That question hangs over them like a blade.

“I don’t think I should be anywhere without you, Arya, or Grey Worm anymore,” Dany says, her voice flat. “My handmaids will listen to what I say; I’m their queen. I have to be around people who will know when I’m not myself— people who can stop me.”

Jon reaches up and cradles her face softly. His heart rises up his throat. “Stop you from doing what?”

“Whatever he tries to make me do next,” she answers. She sounds detached, but it soon gives way to pain as tears swell in her eyes. She reaches up and sets her hands over the backs of his. “The worst part is that there’s no way for us to communicate when he’s mixing things up in my head. I keep wanting to come up with something…some word or gesture that I could use to show you when I’m me, so you know that what I’m saying is truly what I feel…but he hears everything. He hears what I’m saying right now. And he could influence me to do it even when I’m not me. I’m so afraid that he’s going to win, that people are going to listen to the things he makes me say, and I’m going to get pushed out of myself.”

He’s scared of that, too. But he remembers the way her eyes had looked in that bath— the way he’d known at once that something wasn’t right.

“I’ll know, Dany,” he swears. “I can see it in your eyes— I can tell. And he can’t do a thing about that. I’ll know. With you, I know everything.”

Is it their shared blood or their shared love that makes him so in-tune to her? Both, he thinks. All he knows is that they’ve grown so close now that he knows her better than he’s ever known himself. He can recall the taste of her with perfect clarity at a moment’s notice. He can close his eyes and smell her rose-scented hair no matter where he is. He can hear her laugh even if he’s in a noisy hall packed with boisterous soldiers. Her heart is entwined and twisted with his; she draws air into her lungs, and he exhales it. Nothing in the world feels as right as being inside of her— being close as close can get, feeling every bit of her, being caught in a shared moment that belongs to them and them only. A kingdom within a kingdom.

“And if you looked into my eyes and I wasn’t me anymore, what would you do?”

That’s easy.
“I’d get you back.” He kisses her full lips, his heart skipping a beat in his chest at the softness of her returning kiss. “I’d make you you again.”

“What if you couldn’t? What if I was like that kitchen girl.”

“I’d find a way to heal you.”

“If you couldn’t?”

“There’s no possibility that I couldn’t. Do you know why?”

She waits quietly, her fingers pulling through his curls gently as she does. It’s soothing like nothing else in the world.

“Because not a thing in this entire world would be able to stop me.”

The authority ringing in his voice surprises even himself. Dany’s smiling as she kisses him again, her fingers pressing gently into his scalp as she cups the back of his head.

“You’re sounding kingly now,” she murmurs. She rubs her nose against his after her kiss; it’s so precious to Jon that his heart fills his entire chest. “I like it.”

It was always said that Aegon the Conqueror had loved Rhaenys Targaryen so deeply that, upon her murder during the First Dornish War, his grief and rage were hellfire that rained down on the Dornish for two years straight. He and Visenya Targaryen burned Dorne to cinders, and then doubled back and burned those cinders to ash.

As a child learning about the period called the Dragon’s Wroth, he had thought two years was an absurd amount of time. To him, it was impossible to believe someone’s rage could burn so fiercely for so long. He always assumed it was an embellishment on the true history, a belief that was only bolstered by Arya’s spirited reenactments of it during courtyard games. It’s just something they say to make Aegon and Visenya sound like fearsome heroes, he’d thought. Something to inspire people like Arya. It’s nicer to think they did all that out of love. He remembers even telling Arya that during one of her frequent ‘once, Visenya Targaryen…’ spiels. They didn’t do all that for two years just because they were angry and hurt, he insisted. Anger can’t last that long. Jon remembers now how long a year had felt when he was a child, and so he understands why he thought that. Arya, though, was adamant, even then. Yes! she’d insisted, they avenged her for two years and they would’ve done more, only you can only burn something so many times. I would do the same thing for my sister. Wouldn’t you do that for me?

He can’t remember now how he’d responded. He’d probably joked and said something like you’d never get yourself killed in the first place! He can’t recall. But he can recall his skepticism, and now, lying here with his arms around Daenerys Targaryen, he is skeptical again.

But not because he doubts Aegon’s rage and grief lasted two years. But because two years doesn’t seem long enough.

His own rage and grief, he thinks, would burn on for decades on end, and it would take Westeros with it.

IV.

In her dreams, she’s not herself.

Her silver-gold hair becomes longer, reaching past her hips, and it curls in loose spirals. Her eyes,
once violet, are now a mismatched pair inspired by all the loveliness of the natural world: one a blue as dark and deep as the Shivering Sea, the other green as spring grass. Her breasts are fuller and she stands taller. Like Daenerys, she speaks multiple languages. Like Daenerys, she currently has Lord Bloodraven inside of her.

*I’m not me*, Daenerys reminds herself, frozen inside the stranger’s body, *I’m not me, so this isn’t happening, and I’m going to wake up. I’m going to wake. It’s just a matter of time.*

She turns her face, hiding it into the pillow, and she tries to ignore the putrid smell of patchouli oil clinging to his white hair. It hangs heavy in the air and makes her gag. It hurts, what he’s doing to this stranger— she doesn’t mean to, but she hears herself cry out, her voice not her own.

It’s nothing new: she’s been pushed into the minds of more female ancestors than she can recall over the past few nights. She’s felt their pain with them. She has been devoured by a dragon, mauled by her own father through her mother’s eyes, imprisoned, chained, choked. She’s fallen to her death from atop the dragon Meraxes, died in childbirth, died from poison. She’s writhed in bed, taken with fever and agony, as a child she wanted more than the world bled out of her. She’s rocked more dead corpses than she cares to remember. Once, she was even pushed into the mind of her own past-self and forced to relive her first wedding night. Bloodraven had been particularly proud of himself after that last vision, but Dany had refused to show any fear. *Is that supposed to frighten me? I already lived through that. I survived that. I’m supposed to be scared of the past? I carry the past with me every day. My past, and theirs. Is that the best you can do?*

She had felt his fury after that. He was crueler the next couple of nights, but he still didn’t get it, and he still doesn’t. He still thinks the worst pain a woman could possibly experience must come from the hands of a man, but that hasn’t been Daenerys's experience at all. If he truly wanted to hurt her, he would show her Irri’s dead body on the floor, Missandei’s head falling from her shoulders, her empty stomach after she lost Rhaego. He’d show her Viserion weaving to his watery resting place, Rhaegal crying out in pain. He'd show her Ser Jorah's body going limp in her arms. He doesn’t. That’s how she knows he’s getting some pleasure from his particular torture.

She manages it as well as she can; it helps that Jon usually wakes her soon after it all begins. But it’s different tonight. She isn’t being pulled from her dreams. She's never been in this woman's head before. And she's never been in a vision with *him*.

“This is how she liked it, Daenerys,” Lord Bloodraven coos into her ear, and somehow, hearing him speak to her -- *her*, not Shiera Seastar, not the woman whose body she's been forced into inside this vision of a memory-- makes it all the more traumatizing. The sound of his voice and the brush of his lips to her ear make her push against his arms, smack her fists into his chest, struggle to push him off of her. But her fight only fuels him. He whispers: “And you do, too, don’t you?”

She doesn’t. She doesn’t. But then he’s in her head, and she does. She fights against the pleasure he forces into this stranger’s mind— feeling more violated than she’s ever felt before— and he laughs.

“Does Aegon fuck you like this? Maybe I’ll go into his head next time, and I’ll show him how.”

“No,” she begs. She tries to reach back and push at him, but suddenly, she can’t move anything— not her arms, her legs, not even her hand. She can’t even speak. She feels terror drench her insides. *No*, she begs.

“When I take over your mind, this is where you’ll be. Stuck in the back of your own mind living in whatever sort of world I make for you. I think this will be it. This is your own personal hell, isn’t it? I know it is. I made it just for you. But don’t worry— you won’t only be a bedslave. I would never waste your superior blood. I’ll put a baby in you, a bastard of my own. I’ll do it now. How would
you like that? I know how much you want to be a mother."

"Wake me up," she thinks, the words meant for Jon, for Arya, both who had been in the room with her when she fell asleep. It was their first night on the boat, their first night on their journey. Dany already wishes they’d never gone. *Wake me up. You woke me every other time. Wake me now.*

Suddenly, she’s herself again. She’s standing at the bedside in her chambers on the boat, her body trembling but unhurt. Untouched. Then Lord Bloodraven is in front of her— tall, his hair long and white, a mark like a splash of blood on the side of his face. His smile reminds Dany of the leer on the face of the harpy statues in Astapor.

She recoils, more terrified now than she’s ever been, and he’s put her through some terrible things in her dreams for many nights now. *He’s not really here— you’re still in your head. He can’t have his body here. He’s not really here— he’s not real—*

Still smiling, he reaches out, and Dany can’t go any further; the bed is pressing into the back of her legs. He looms over her and reaches out, pressing a finger to her cheek, as if to prove he can. She flinches. His laugh is booming.

"Look at them," he says suddenly, glancing over Dany’s shoulder. "How peaceful they look. Do you think they realize I’m here?"

Dany doesn’t look behind herself. She knows who is there. Arya and Jon.

"As you’re fond of saying, the ones who love us most should protect us. So I suppose they don’t really love you. Do you think they’ll even notice when you’re no longer the owner of your body, the person in your head?"

She knows by now that the more she talks to him, the more encouraged he becomes in his sadism, but she can’t help it.

"Yes," she says, her chin held high. She meets his red eyes. "They will."

He takes another step closer. Dany tries to lean back, but her legs hit the bed, and she goes falling back onto it, landing on her bottom. Fear seizes her at once; she fists her hands around the blankets and drags herself backwards on the bed, trying to get away from him, but he kneels on the mattress and leans over her. He forces her shoulders back, pinning her to the bed. She turns her face: Jon is right there, two arms’ lengths away, and Arya is curled in an armchair right beside the bed. She tries to scream, but nothing comes out.

"This bed is very special to you, isn’t it?" Lord Bloodraven coos. He strokes her cheek; that intimate gesture makes her stomach convulse. The bitter, acrid taste of vomit hits the back of her tongue. He presses her shoulders down harder and then looks over at Jon. "Do you think we’ll wake him?" He smiles suddenly— it makes Dany shudder. "Do you think he’ll fight me? It would be great fun. In fact…"

In the tiny span of time it takes Dany to blink, he’s standing at the bedside again, Longclaw in his hands. Dany’s blood runs cold. She drags herself over to where Jon is and grabs his leg, shaking him. "Jon, wake up. Wake up!"

"Oh, I’m not going to hurt him with this. Or even you. It’s for you," Lord Bloodraven says. "I fear I’ve been quite nasty to you over these past few weeks, haven’t I? You deserve your justice that you talk so much about. There you go. Take it."

He holds Longclaw out. Dany stares at him.
"It's not a trick. Take it. Go ahead," he urges her. "Here's the way I see it, Daenerys: either I'm physically here, which means I can hold you down on that bed right beside Aegon and do what I'd like to you, or I'm not really here physically, and in which case, this is all a naughty mind game I'm playing on you. Wouldn't you like to figure out which one it is? It would be useful to know for sure, wouldn’t it?"

She still doesn’t move. His face contorts in rage.

"TAKE IT!" he screams. He unsheathes the familiar blade. "Take it, or I’ll test it on Aegon’s throat."

She slides off the bed, coming to stand in front of him. She reaches out, her heart hammering. She expects something horrible to happen to her the moment her fingers wrap around the sword’s hilt, but nothing does. She holds the heavy sword in her hands, turning to look at Arya, fast asleep in the chair. What would Arya do now? Run him straight through with the blade? Wait and bide her time?

Lord Bloodraven holds his hands out at his sides. "Go on. You know you want to."

She does. More than she’s ever wanted anything in her life. But she knows it can’t be that easy.

"There’s no point. It won’t hurt you."

"No, it won’t kill me. But it will hurt me. Do you think I deserve pain?"

"You deserve nothing but pain."

"Then use that sword. Or are you too weak to do even that?"

"I’m not weak. I’ve never been." She refuses to let him get a rise out of her beyond that. She tightens her hands on Longclaw. "Fine. I’ll give you what you want."

"That’s a first. Even in Shiera’s body you put up such a fuss. They're only visions...they can't hurt you. But then, Rhaella put up the same fight, I recall. And you truly are your mother's daughter." His smile consumes his face. It's bestial. "Your father gave into the visions I fed him much easier than Aegon has so far, but don't worry. He'll break, too. And then they won't only be visions. Poor dear...I think he'll suffer as much as you when it finally happens. He truly has delicate sensibilities."

She thinks he doesn’t see it coming; that gives her satisfaction of its own, but it’s only the starting course to her true gratification. She takes the sword and swings it towards his neck, and then, right before the blade touches his neck, just as Arya showed her, she abruptly stills her momentum and lowers her arms. His eyes are wide in surprise as she takes the blade and shoves it through him, right at his groin. It’s easier to get the blade through than she’d thought it’d be. Valyrian steel, she attests it to. She watches him double over, laughter bubbling up in her chest, her hands tight around the hilt of the sword, still protruding from his body. She sees blood…could it be that he’s real? Could it be that this is over, that she’s killed him? Just like that?

She drops her hands from the sword, but suddenly, he’s not standing where he was anymore. There’s no blood on the floor, and Longclaw is back in her hands as if she’d never thrust it at Lord Bloodraven in the first place.

Then he’s in front of her, the front of his body pressed to hers, her arms around him, Longclaw’s blade pressed to the small of his back. She doesn’t know how he got there, how Longclaw got there.

"Now Daenerys," he whispers, his lips pressing briefly to hers. She spits on his face after he pulls
away; he laughs in response and reaches up, swiping her spit onto his finger and sucking his finger into his mouth. She stares at him in disgust. “You’ll have to try better than that. Why don’t you try again?”

Her arms ache from the strange angle the sword is at, but she thinks she can drive it through his back. He’s standing pressed to her, belly to belly, but she can stop the sword before it hurts her, too. What does it matter? If this is the way he wants to torment her tonight, it’s better than other ways he’s chosen. She’d rather stab him over and over again than endure whatever cruelty he can come up with next.

But something isn’t right. It nags at her, pulling at the threads of her thoughts, keeping her from stabbing him again. *I’m missing something*, she thinks, and she feels an emptiness fill her chest. *Something isn’t right.*

“Do it!” Lord Bloodraven demands. He steps closer to her. “Do it, or I’ll fuck you over his lap, and I’ll wake him and make him watch.”

She’s heard so many vile things from him that she hardly blinks at that. She’s *seen* so many vile things. What’s one more?

“Be quiet,” she tells him, her mind spinning. She’s trying to grasp those loose threads, trying to figure out what her mind is trying to tell her. It’s so hard when he’s got the reins. “I’m thinking.”

He blinks at that. Laughter follows. “You’re feeling brazen,” he appreciates. His hand fists in her hair, yanking so hard her eyes water. “If you ever tell me to be quiet again, I’ll make it so you can never speak again.”

*Ignore him,* her own voice says in her head. *Ignore him. His threats are nothing. Think. Something is missing. What is it? What is missing?*

“Do it,” he says again. He steps back, pushing the blade a tiny bit into his back. He inhales in pain. “Go on. Finish it. DO IT!”

Dany feels her own thoughts being dragged away from her—his doing. She resists, clinging harder to the sound of her own voice, refusing to relent. What is missing? Jon is here. And…

She feels her heart tremble in her chest. She looks down slowly. Instead of the swell of her stomach, she only sees Lord Bloodraven’s stomach pressed to hers. To her flat stomach. She looks back up at Lord Bloodraven, the pieces clicking into place in her mind. He is furious; Dany’s feels his rage, and from it, he sends excruciating pain into her head, pain so bad she has no choice but to clench her fists and whimper. She can’t even see—everything goes dark. And then…

“Dany!”

Jon’s voice. He’s frightened. She blinks her eyes open, and the first thing she sees is her belly, round and full. She’s relieved. But then she notices other things. She’s standing in their chambers on the boat, and in the soft, silvery light from the moon, she sees drops of blood hitting the wooden planks at her feet. Between her legs. *Drip…drip…drip…she’s standing in a puddle of it.*

“What are you doing?!” Jon demands, his voice shaking in horror. She sways on her feet. A second later, his hand touches her arm, and that’s when she sees Longclaw.

She’s holding it in front of her own stomach, the point pressed near her belly button. But she’s not holding the hilt: she’s holding the blade, and when she sees the blade buried so deeply inside her palms that it has nearly cut through to the backs of her hands, she feels her stomach heave.
“Gods,” Jon says, faint, horrified. Dany is too afraid to unclench her fingers, too afraid to try and pull her hands off the blade. She thinks any movement will make that blade slice her hands right in two. She stares at the point of the sword: it’s already cut a hole into her night dress, and she feels blood congealing the fabric to her skin. “Let go. Dany, let go! Let go!”

“I can’t,” she croaks. “My hands…”

His hysteria wakes Arya. Dany hears her footsteps, followed quickly by swearing.

“Her hands—” Jon says, his voice trembling.

“I’ll fetch the maester. Get something—a bedsheets or something—” Jon pulls his own nightshirt over his head, his hands shaking. “Yes, that will work. Get something else for the other hand, too—yes, that’s good.” Arya looks at Dany. When she speaks, she sounds remarkably calm. It lessens the pressure on Dany’s lungs. “Daenerys, I’m taking the hilt carefully, okay, so it doesn’t move at all. As soon as I’ve steadied it, pull your hands back, and Jon will wrap them up.”

Dany nods. The pain is starting to hit her: it’s less sharp than she would have imagined. It’s more of a deep, steady ache. She knows the shock is keeping most of it at bay.

Arya slowly wraps her fingers around Longclaw’s hilt. True to her word, it doesn’t move in Dany’s hands. She meets Dany’s eyes, hers drenched in pain. She nods once. Dany pulls her hands to the sides, away from the blade, and as soon as she does, blood begins pouring down her wrists, soaking the sleeves of her night dress. Throbbing pain follows shortly after, the kind that bounces up her bones and travels so far she can feel the pounding in her temples.

Jon grabs her right wrist first, winding his nightshirt tightly around that palm. As he’s doing that, Dany gets a look at her left. Her knees buckle. She’s no stranger to gore, but the sight of her own hand sliced nearly in two makes her head swim. Horribly, she can’t stop herself from trying to curl the fingers of her left hand; she doubles over at the sight of the tendons convulsing inside the gaping, bloody mush that used to be her own hand. She vomits all over the floor once, twice, three times. By the third time, she stumbles, falling into Jon, unable to stand.

He binds her left hand, and then he helps her to the edge of the bed. He cups her elbows and pushes her arms up so that she’s holding her hands straight above her head. Her head is spinning. Delirious with shock, or trauma, or blood loss, or pain—she’s not sure—she tries to reach between her own legs, unsure whether the blood she saw on the floor was from her hands or from her. She feels terribly confused. But the second her hand grazes her thigh, she cries out in pain, and blood surges from the wound at a faster pace.

“Don’t move your hands!” Jon says at once, his voice shaking. “Hold them above your head and keep them there!”

He gently moves her arms up again. They shake so violently that Dany is sure she won’t be able to hold that position for long.

“I have to check,” she insists.

“Check what? What’s wrong?”

“I saw blood.” Her own voice sounds wild, unhinged.

“Your hands are bleeding!” Jon reminds her. “The floor is covered in it! No telling how long you stood there and bled—” he breaks off, too upset to continue.
“I’m not bleeding?” she asks. She feels tears burn in her eyes. A second later, they’re searing down her cheeks. “I have blood on my stomach. I think I hurt her. I think I’m bleeding.”

“No,” he assures her. He touches her belly. He widens the hole in her gown, peering through it at her skin. She feels his thumb rub over a spot that’s sore. “It’s not deep at all. You barely nicked yourself. You stopped the blade in time.”

“I saw blood,” she persists, growing hysterical quickly. “Between my legs.”

“It’s okay,” he says, but how does he know that? “Do you want me to check?”

She nods. Her hands are throbbing so hard it feels as if they have a pulse of their own. Even her teeth ache from the pain. Jon sets a hand on her knees and parts them, leaning over to peer between her legs.

“It’s dark,” she says, tears choking each syllable.

His fingers brush the insides of her upper thighs. “Nothing. You’re not. The baby is fine. But you aren’t.” He straightens. He reaches up, cupping her elbows, trying to help her hold her hands high to stop the bleeding. “What happened, Dany?”

She laughs. It sounds strange, hysterical. Where do I start? she thinks, and then she laughs again. The metallic scent of blood hangs sharp in the air between them. Where do I start? she thinks again, her thoughts becoming spaced out, tired. Where?

“What happened?!” Maester Olken cries. Daenerys has never heard him sound so insolent. He rushes over to her side. By the time he’s there, Arya’s lit the fireplace, bathing the room in bright orange light. Dany stares at the fabric wrapped around her hands: Jon’s once-white sleep shirt is crimson, so soaked in blood it’s dripping steadily onto the carpet. The tunic he’d wrapped around her other hand is similarly soaked, though that cut appears to be less severe than the cut on her right hand. And when she looks to the wooden floor where she’d been standing, she’s stunned at the blood she sees. It’s the dark pool underneath the heart tree in Jon’s godswood. It’s a black pit. Dany can’t look away from it.

“We have to cauterize it,” the maester says, without even unwinding the fabric. “Stitching will take too long to stop the blood loss in time. Hold your hands up again until the metal is hot, Your Grace.”

Dany tries to follow his command, but she’s so tired. She can’t seem to lift her hands up higher than chest-height before the muscles in her shoulders give out and they fall back down. She feels very faint. Very confused. She hardly feels it when Jon lifts her hands for her.

“I don’t burn,” she says, but her tongue is heavy, and she doesn’t know if he hears her. She feels him tie something around both her wrists, so tight she feels as if all her blood has pooled in her hands. Tingling follows shortly after. She watches him go towards the fire, a thin piece of metal in hand. “Jon,” she says, dizzy, and when she tries to reach for him, it feels as if she has a weight at the end of her arm—she stumbles to the side, nearly falling over. He catches her. “It won’t,” she tells him.

“She’s the Unburnt,” she hears Jon remind the maester, and she feels relief flow through her. “You need to stitch it now.”

“An instance of old magic doesn’t mean she can’t burn. Everybody can burn.” The bit of metal glows bright in the flames.

“Not her. It’s a waste of time! She’s already lost so much blood!”
“Those wounds will take a long time to stitch shut, perhaps too long. This is the best option.”

Jon, frustrated, sits beside Dany as the maester unwinds Jon’s nightshirt from her right hand. Dany feels throbbing pressure at the site of the wound. She hears Arya inhale sharply a moment later: she guesses the maester has pressed the metal to her skin, but she doesn’t feel anything.

Silence, and then: “I told you. Get the bloody needle ready.”

“It’s already ready, I did it,” Arya says, her words close to a snap. “Listen to Jon.” Through half-closed eyelids, Dany sees her pass a threaded needle towards the maester. She sets his opened kit beside him afterwards. “Do the right first. It’s the deepest and it’s bleeding the most.”

“Have you received training from a healer?” The Maester asks Arya curiously.

“No. But I know what I’m talking about.”

“Well, since you know what you’re talking about, boil some wine so we can disinfect the wounds. It’d be better to do it before we stitch them closed, but we’ll have to do it afterwards. Your Grace, do you feel all right?”

Her head is so heavy. She leans it against Jon.

She feels his lips press to her hair and Lyella shift inside of her. And then nothing.

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“What chance we can sail around it?”

“No, Your Grace. Not unless we want to add at least a day onto our journey. We’re still two days out from Dragonstone as it stands.”

“We can’t add any time. How bad does the storm look?”

“Hard to say. Lady Arya says the storms have been severe this season, with one quickly following another. We’re raising our storm sails now. What are your orders, Your Grace?”

“Let me know if something changes, but as of right now, let’s push through it. If the weather becomes untenable, try to get us to Sharp Point. We can rest there until the weather calms.”

“Yes, Your Grace. How is Her Grace?”

“Resting. If you see Arya on the deck, will you send her down?”

“Yes, Your Grace.”

Daenerys’s hands are throbbing. It’s all she can think about for an uncertain amount of time. They feel heavy, and each throb makes her entire arm ache, especially her fingers. She’s so weak it feels as if all her blood is pooled there in her hands, leaving little to circulate the rest of her body.

And her stomach and hips ache. It’s a wringing sort of pain, like someone’s taken her womb in their hands and twisted as it as you might do to wet fabric. It echoes to her lower back, down her thighs. She tries to lift her hand to touch it, but even moving her hand across the sheets sends pain careening up her arm to her jaw.

“Yes?” Arya.
“Could you sit with her? I want to go look at the sky.”

“Don’t bloody bother. You won’t like what you see. The sky is so dark you'd think it was night. You were right, Jon. We should have stayed.”

“We’re only two days out. If we can push through this storm—”

“More will follow this one. I told you the weather was unpredictable. Gendry told you again—”

“Arya, this isn’t helping. What would you have me do? Magically turn back time?”

“We should turn back and go back to King’s Landing! We’ve got sickhouses there.”

“And we have the maester and all his medicines here. He says there’s nothing more he could do to help in King’s Landing than he could do here. And we can’t turn back now. Dany wouldn’t want that. She was adamant about this— about going to Dragonstone. That was what she wanted.”

“Then let’s sail away from the storm. Better to spend an extra day at sea than shipwreck and swim to Dragonstone.”

“No. We need to get her there as soon as we can.” Jon’s quiet for a tense moment. Then his next words burst from him, angry and thick with pain: “And none of this would be happening if you hadn’t fallen asleep.”

Arya is quiet. Even with her body overloaded with pain, Dany feels her heart lurch for her.

“That isn’t fair. You were asleep, too.”

“Because you promised me you would watch over her!”

“And you left Longclaw in the room! It should’ve been locked in that trunk or at your hip at all times!”

They both sound close to tears. Dany wants to tell them to stop, that it’s not their fault, but her tongue is too heavy to lift, and her lips feel glued together.

“We’re both at fault. We both let her down.”

“I don’t know what happened, Jon. I was wide awake one moment, and then next thing I knew, I heard you screaming. I never thought…how could she not feel her hands being cut through like that? How could she not even cry out? We would have heard it if she had. We would have.”

“We underestimated what Lord Bloodraven could do to her. He’s playing with us, Arya. I daydream about freezing him to death, and he tricks Dany into sitting in a bath so cold her lips turn purple. I come close to cutting his hands off, and he cuts Dany’s in half. He’s not just trying to hurt Lyanna because he thinks he must because of that prophecy: he’s enjoying this. Every minute of it. It’s a game, and he won’t stop. What the fuck are we going to do?”

He sounds broken. Hopeless. Dany wants to reach for him, but she couldn’t touch him even if she could get the strength to move her heavy arm. The horrible wringing in her lower half is gone, at least.

“I don’t know. Where’s the damn Lord of Light? Isn’t he supposed to be guiding us?”

“He’s abandoned us. I spent all day yesterday staring into the fire. All I saw was flames.”
“Maybe Daenerys will see something when she wakes.”

Jon’s quiet for so long Dany nearly lets herself slip back into darkness. Finally, he says: “I’m so afraid Lord Bloodraven has been tormenting her the entire time she’s been unconscious.”

*He hasn’t*, Dany wants to say, realizing right then the *peace* she’d found in that darkness she’d pulled her mind from. It had been quiet, so quiet she didn’t even know she existed. So quiet and soft and solitary. She’d been alone— no one had hurt her, no one had invaded her mind or her thoughts. She was free. She wants to go back to it.

“Me too,” Arya whispers.

But he didn’t, and when she slips back into the soft embrace of that quiet, dark place, he still doesn’t. She guesses she’s so unwell he can’t get a good footing in her thoughts. *Let me stay here*, she thinks the next time she rouses, the pain in her hands and her womb pulling her mind from it. *Just let me stay*. The peace is so comforting it could be Rhaella’s arms wrapped around her. It could be the quiet darkness of her own mother’s womb. *We begin again*, she thinks, half delirious. *I could begin again. This time, I will sail for Westeros right after my dragons are born, and I will go to Winterfell. And when Jon and I fall in love again, we’ll leave this place forever. We’ll go far away—the furthest corners of the known world—and no one will find us. And even if Lord Bloodraven one day did, I would have Viserion, Rhaegal, and Drogon. Nobody could hurt us.*

It’s the clenching ache in her womb that finally pulls her mind securely into reality. It draws an involuntary groan from her, and before she can remember not to, she reaches towards her middle with her right hand. The agony that bolts through her bones after moving her hand makes her cry out.

Jon is at her side in an instant. He smells like home: warm, spicy, like a burst of cinnamon across your tongue, or a touch of clove. It’s comforting; she feels the panic that had begun to lace through her abate. She tries to reach for him, to hold him, but she can’t— the pain in her hands is too great. When the tension in her middle passes, she is able to open her eyes and look at him. She finds him leaning over her, tears sparkling in his dark eyes.

“Dany,” he greets, relieved. His touch is gentle against her cheek. “How do you feel?”

She shakes her head. Fear has set in now. She understands what is happening, and she doesn’t think she has the strength for it. Not now.

“Here,” the maester says gently. Dany turns to look at him. Just that one movement makes her head spin. He’s holding a steaming mug of something that smells salty. “*Beef bone broth with marrow. Drink it. As much as you can. It will help restock your blood.*”

But the smell turns her stomach, and when Dany tries to take a sip, she twists away and retches. Jon’s hand brushes her hair until she returns to her pillow, trembling, dizzy. She wants nothing more than to go back to the darkness, but she can’t. She must be strong now. She just has no idea where she’s going to find the strength.

She nearly tears up as she forces herself to sit. She uses her fingers to press down on the mattress, to help ease herself up, but that makes the sutures in her palms stretch and pull, and that causes her to pant against another round of nausea. She has to close her eyes against the swimming in her head.

“Let me try again,” she requests, her voice cracking from disuse.

He holds the mug to her lips once more. Dany parts her lips, nausea already mounting at the salty
smell, and he tips the mug so that hot broth, so thick it’s nearly gelatinous, pours into Dany’s mouth. She clenches her fists as she struggles to swallow it and keep it down, and that’s a mistake: she chokes on a cry of pain, sputtering broth all over the blanket, growing light-headed as she hacks.

Again, she pushes herself upright. Again, she tells them to let her try once more. This time, she has tears in her eyes as she swallows a sip, and she has to turn her face and press her mouth hard into her shoulder to keep from bringing it right back up. It’s the most awful thing she’s ever tasted—worse than the raw stallion heart she consumed at the doseh khaleen. Or maybe it’s just that she’s in so much pain that everything would make her want to vomit.

She forces herself to take another sip, and another, and another. She has to stop every other sip to pant through her urge to heave. It doesn’t help that the strain in lower half returns, cramping and powerful. She turns her face from the mug as it overtakes her, breathing through it, her wounded hand seeking her stomach. She presses with her fingers only, learning now to avoid pressing her palm against anything, and she’s not surprised when she feels the tautness of her womb. She has no idea how long it’s been going on. She has no idea how long she’s been unconscious, even. But she knows she’s going to be in trouble if she can’t get her strength back. She doesn’t even know if it’s possible.

**Did he plan this?** Dany wonders. **Did he make this happen somehow?**

She had wondered for days now whether the baby would come early, but she had hoped and prayed that she wouldn’t. It was too early, at least a moonturn and a half too early. But her body had felt different recently. She could feel Lyraella’s head wedged low in her pelvis, and no matter how she coaxed her with quiet requests in Valyrian or gentle nudges to her womb, she wouldn’t budge from that head-down position. The pressure in her hips and lower back had gotten unbearable, and nothing she ate sat right with her. She told herself Lyraella was just heavy, but she had known instinctively that that wasn’t it. How much was her body’s fault and how much was from Lord Bloodraven’s outside influence? Her stress, no doubt, contributed to this somehow. The stress he put her body through with his various attempts on Lyraella’s life. **If Lyraella dies, she thinks, it’s just as much his fault as mine.**

She chokes the rest of the broth down, growing more and more upset with every passing moment, but she can’t waste any time on tears. She must be strong now.

“I want to get up and walk,” she tells Jon.

“Right now?” Jon asks, horrified. He looks at the maester.

“You’re too weak, Your Grace. You lost so much blood. You could fall,” the maester says. “Take more broth, and then maybe.”

The last thing she wants is more of that accursed broth. She’s still not certain she’ll be able to keep what she drank down. But she nods. Jon holds the mug to her lips this time while the maester unwinds the tight bandages around her hands to check her wounds. Dany doesn’t want to look: she keeps her eyes closed, communicating to Jon when she’s ready for him to tip the mug back again by touching her toes to his leg.

The maester is silent as he works on her hands. His attentions make them throb more incessantly, and she can feel the beginnings of deep, aching soreness just underneath the pulsating. It takes a long time. Dany can tell it’s bad from the way the mug starts trembling in Jon’s hands every time he looks down. When she’s nearly done with the mug, some broth splashes out at the trembling of Jon’s hand, landing atop Dany’s stomach. When he reaches to wipe at it, he freezes, his hand flattening at once to her belly.
Dany doesn’t look at him: her eyes are already shut as the tension he feels beneath his hand washes over her. She doesn’t know if he realizes what it means that her stomach is stretched tight like a drum beneath his hand, but he certainly can tell it feels different. She breathes with it slowly, waiting for it to ebb, thinking of that soft darkness again. *If Bloodraven tries to come into my mind now,* she thinks, *he’ll leave. He couldn’t handle this.* It makes her hook her mind further into the pain, savoring it, leaning into it. It protects her. It protects Lyaela.

“Dany.”

His voice is urgent, distressed. Dany’s heart trembles at the sound of it. She opens her eyes once the contraction has passed and meets his gaze. He looks broken.

“I want to walk,” she tells him again, trying to maintain her composure. She can’t fall apart now. “I must get up and walk.”

He looks at Maester Olken and then back at Dany. Dany doesn’t know why she doesn’t want to tell the maester. She thinks maybe it’s because she knows he’ll try to keep her in that bed, and everything inside of her is telling her she will die if she does. *I must get my strength back. I must walk,* she thinks on a loop. She thinks of the Dothraki women who ride their horses until the moment they push their children from them, the *khals* that must never fall from their horses. *I must keep going. I must not stop. To stop is to die.*

After she’s finished her second mug of broth, and the maester has finished tending to her hands, she hooks her calves over the edge of the bed and uses her legs to pull herself to the edge. Jon stands and holds his hand out, and she nearly places hers there. But he grasps her forearms gently instead, tugging her up that way.

At once, she’s so dizzy she stumbles. Jon’s hands, still on her forearms, tighten as he steadies her.

“Sit back down,” he pleads.

She shakes her head. That motion makes her vision rock and nausea swell.

“I just need a moment.” She doesn’t know if that’s true, but she tries it anyway. She leans into Jon and breathes, fighting against the nausea and the dizziness. He wraps his arm around her waist, holding her securely, and she’s glad for it. Her first few steps make her feel as if she’s gliding, and by the time they reach the door to their chambers — the same door Jon had once knocked on in the dead of night — she’s so exhausted her legs tremble. But she keeps going, walking on legs that feel heavy and boneless, her heart racing strangely in her chest. It feels fast and slow all at once.

“How far do you want to walk?” Jon asks. “You need to tell the maester about your stomach. It didn’t feel like it usually does.”

“He can’t do anything for it. It’s my time,” Dany tells him.

A thunderclap booms through the corridor, the sound so powerful it makes the floors vibrate beneath their feet. Seconds later, Dany hears torrential rain begin, intermingled with the roar of high winds. The floors shift beneath her feet as the boat sways; if it weren’t for Jon’s arm around her waist, she’s certain she’d be on the floor.

“It can’t be your time,” she hears Jon say. Plead, really. “It’s too early. I’m sure it’s something else…”

“It’s not,” Dany tells him firmly. “It’s my time. Perhaps I’ll make it to Dragonstone, perhaps I won’t. But she’s coming.” She stumbles into Jon as the boat rocks again. He grasps her tighter. “I’d like to
see Arya and Grey Worm before—

She stops. Jon looks away from her, his throat convulsing as he swallows hard.

“Let’s walk to them,” Dany finishes. She feels like she’s clutching to some inner source of strength with all she has; it keeps her together, keeps her focused. She thinks that source must be her love for Lyaella. She knows that she isn’t going to survive to leave this boat. Not after all the blood she’s already lost. But Lyaella still might.

“We’ll summon them to us. We need to go back. The weather’s only going to get worse before it gets better.”

She starts to argue, but thunder cracks through the din of the storm, so loud it makes her eardrums expand painfully. There’s a loud rushing sound, and then both she and Jon fall against the wall of the corridor, the floor turning beneath them. Even if she wasn’t weak, she couldn’t walk in this.

“All right,” she relents. Her right hand throbs worse; she’d hit it against the wall when they fell, and when she looks down at her bandage, the bright white has blood blooming over it. She’s starting to feel so dizzy she can’t tell the floor from the ceiling at times; her vision twists and inverts, her head feels as if it’s caught in waves.

They turn to walk back to their chambers. Dany’s halfway there when she feels liquid trickling slowly down her inner thighs. She and Jon stop as the boat grows unsteady again, and Dany reaches down, her fingers trembling, and touches the wetness. Her hand comes back slick, but it isn’t blood. It continues trickling from her, leaving a small puddle beneath her, but she can’t do anything to stop it.

She and Jon share a long look, both leaning against the corridor wall as the boat pitches to the side once more, standing together in fluid from her womb. She sets her hands on her stomach. She doesn’t care about the pain in her hands—soon, the sensations in her lower half are more intense. The agony in her hands disappears entirely.

“Dany…we’ve got to get back to the bed.” She feels him grab her wrists. “And you’ve pulled some of your stitches—come on.”

She lets him half-drag her towards their chambers, stumbling on legs too weak to move. The cramping ache is tighter this time and drags on longer than it had previously, but she finds herself thinking her weakness is worse. She would take that pain a thousand times over if she could just feel strong again. If she could stand, if the thumping of her heart didn’t feel so wrong (fastslow, it trembles in her chest, like wings fluttering fast and then stopping erratically). If she didn’t feel so dizzy.

“She’s laboring,” Jon tells Maester Olken, panic encasing each word. “What do we do?”

Dany drifts for a moment, the darkness beckoning. She feels the maester touch her stomach. It feels very far away, as if she’s not even in her body anymore.

“How do we do,” he says, but he sounds grave. Does he know what Dany knows? Does he know there’s nothing they can do? She was dead the moment she severed her hands on that sword. She was dead the moment Lord Bloodraven took the blood from her that she’d need to get through this. Her only blessing is that she had stopped herself somehow—she had known. She had kept herself from piercing through her child. Now, she must do whatever she can to make that mean something. She must deliver Lyaella alive—she must. She must. She must. Or else what was it all for? She can’t let him win. She can’t. She must…she must…she must...
Fly, she thinks, the word searing through her thoughts, like a red comet through a pitch-dark sky. And she is. She feels the wind whipping past her, caressing her powerful, black wings, and she watches as the sun is consumed by heavy, dark clouds. She's free...but then, she isn't. It's agony. Terrible agony. She can't understand it. It makes her wings give out for a moment, and she falls...but then she catches herself, weaving unsteadily through the clouds. Somebody is chasing her through the sky, but they have no body, no wings, no scales. No fire. She flies low over the boat...she feels them grasp onto her. She's afraid...she's afraid...he's afraid...

“Dany, open your eyes,” Jon urges.

She’s on the bed. She doesn’t remember sitting. She guesses Jon put her here. How long ago? She’s uncertain. It could have been seconds. It could have been hours. She looks up at him. He’s beautiful, she thinks, her thoughts erratic as they bounce through her mind, but will he ever look happy again? His face blurs, her eyelids droop.

I must keep going. I must keep going. She forces her eyelids back up. Her eyes want to roll back into her head. She doesn’t let them.

“I need water.”

“Water,” Jon orders immediately, though Dany isn’t sure who he’s talking to.

The intensity she feels in her womb is an anchor to her thoughts. When it takes over her again, it drags her mind down to some secret place. Like the darkness, it belongs to her and her only, but it’s not dark here. It’s bright as flames, and Dany thinks of anything and everything—all things that are hers. There’s no trace of Lord Bloodraven’s thoughts, no trace of his menace. It’s just her and her body and her baby. Where is he, though? Where is he? She recalls flying over the boat with piercing panic, but she can’t fly. She has no wings. Everything is hazy.

“Here’s some water.” It’s Arya’s voice. Dany’s heart jerks in her chest. She wanted to see her. She wanted to say…what? She can’t remember. But she lets Arya hold the cup of water to her lips, and she sips at it slowly. It feels like ice sliding down her throat. When she’s finished, she meets Arya’s dark eyes—Jon’s, Lyanna’s, maybe Lyella’s, too. “Arya…”

“You’re doing great,” Arya tells her firmly, her jaw set. Dany understands: she wants no goodbyes, she does not accept goodbyes, and she won’t hear them.

“I’m not.” Her own voice is hardly more than a whisper. She’s afraid. Where is Lord Bloodraven? She worries he’s going to come into her mind as soon as she’s holding her baby. He’s shown her visions before of her wringing her neck, throwing her from the window, holding her under water in a tub. She can’t. She can’t. I must keep going. “Do you remember?”

Arya stands. She turns her back to Dany, setting the cup on the bedside table. Dany sees her shoulders shake for a moment, but she masters it. “Of course I remember.”

Dany turns her head to the side, looking for Jon. Just that one movement makes her so dizzy that she has to close her eyes. Thankfully, she feels his hand settle against the side of her neck. He strokes her skin gently with his thumb. He’s there. Right beside her. At least she has him here. At least they’re together.

“Don’t forget,” Dany begs Arya. I love you, she wants to tell her, but that would sound too much like a goodbye, and she doesn’t want to hurt her. “Will you sit with me, too?” To Dany, that request is the same thing as I love you. Be with me, it means. Be here with me and with Jon. You’re my family, too. Us against this—against everything. Right now, we are the three heads of the dragon.
Like Aegon and his sisters—but we won’t conquer this. Not this time.

She watches Arya walk over, but her eyes drift closed soon after that. She can feel Arya and Jon on either side of her for a moment, Jon’s hand on her leg and Arya’s on her forearm, but then she can’t. It’s just her and her body again: nothing else. And she savors it. How long has it been since it’s just been her and her body—since the only thoughts she’s heard are her own? Since the only sensations consuming her are the ones coming from her, belonging to her? She lets the pain swallow her. She rides the waves of it, focusing on it and the soft darkness at the edges of her exhausted mind. I’ll go to you, she thinks on a loop. I’ll go to you, but not yet. Not yet. Not yet. I must keep going—I can’t look back. I am almost home.

The process consumes her: time doesn’t pass the way it used to, the way it ought to. She can’t say how many times she rides through the clenching and unclenching of her womb, her hands throbbing and gushing blood at her sides, her head so light it could be floating over her shoulders. She can’t say how much time passes. She doesn’t know, but she’s thankful for every moment of it. I’ll get to die as me, she thinks quite a few times, the thought tinged with relief. I’ll get to die inside my own body, in my own mind, and Lord Bloodraven won’t be here. She never imagined she’d find such respite in pain. Never imagined she’d be glad for each powerful swell of agony.

"How do you feel?" Jon’s voice sounds as if he’s on the other side of the room, but she can feel him right behind her, his hand on the side of her taut belly. She’s on her side, her knees pulled up as far as they’ll go, but she doesn’t remember rolling over. She’s squeezed tightly, a powerful moment in time where she hears nothing, smells nothing, sees nothing, and then the tightness gradually unfurls. It lasts much longer than it has before. She’s out of breath when it releases her, her face damp with perspiration, her hair wild around her. She reaches back blindly, touching Jon with quivering fingertips. She feels him scoot closer in response.

"I’m okay," she says, focusing on the feeling of his body tucked around hers, his hand pressed to the side of her belly, the far-off sound of the wind and the rain. "It’s okay. It’s good."

If he doubts that assertion, he doesn’t challenge her. He just holds her tight like he expects someone to come drag her away, the pressure of his hold nearly as consuming as her contractions. Like those contractions, it brings her mind to someplace safe. As he kisses the back of her neck, his breath skating across her skin unsteadily, Dany thinks he might finally understand what’s already been started, what they can’t undo. But she loves him too much to address it.

"Tea? Water?" he asks, clearly desperate to help.

She isn’t even sure she’ll be able to keep any of it down, but she nods. She can at least try.

He helps her up and Arya brings her her favorite. Cool mint tea. The kind they used to share during their daily sword lessons, and later, their dagger lessons. Dany sips it carefully, taking it slow, letting the coolness of the mint freeze her throat slowly on the way down.

"When we get to Dragonstone," Arya says, her voice firm, "we’ll find the dragon eggs, and you’ll hatch them, and we’ll get the Three-Eyed Raven back for what he did to your hands. What he’s done to you."

That hope is nothing more than a sweet story, the kind that might be told to children to keep their spirits alive, but Daenerys isn’t sure if Arya realizes that. If she ever reaches Dragonstone again, it will be as nothing more than a body.

She can’t bear to respond, but soon, it doesn’t matter anyway. She’s swallowed alive again. Inside that wrenching stillness, she sees things flash behind her eyes, bright things that had once been in the
shapes of flames. But they pass by too quickly for Daenerys to grasp onto them, too quickly for her to understand.

This time, it drags on longer than she ever imagined it could. She twists, struggling to sit up, to lean forward. She thinks it might help. She presses her palms hard into the mattress, indifferent to the sharp tearing she feels at her wounds, and doubles over as much as she can, breathing with the pressure. Jon’s hand is light over her spine, rubbing her back, but she might as well be half-numb.

This time, when it passes, she falls back against the pillows, her body trembling. Sweat coats her, making her blood-stained nightdress stick to her skin. She's cold, but she's on fire. She doesn't know which one to deal with first. After lying there, her heart beating so fast it feels like one continuous throb, she forces herself back upright to sip at the glass of water the maester brings to her. She drinks as much as she can bear to, and then she turns her face away. The maester is frowning deeply as he sets the cup on the bedside table.

"Here," she hears Arya say quietly, and a moment later, she feels a tugging at her scalp as Arya combs her wild hair. It feels comforting despite the tugs and pulls at each tangle. Dany feels the tension in her shoulders loosening. She leans against Jon and closes her eyes, her heart rate becoming calmer than it has been in what must be hours and hours. Jon takes a warm, damp cloth and cleans the blood from her fingers, her palms, her wrists, her arms. She hears the maester approach and ask to restitch part of her left palm, but it's not bad yet, and Dany doesn't want anyone else with her right then but Arya and Jon. She doesn’t want to be poked at. She just wants to be loved. She feels that so intently that Jon can sense it, somehow: he tells the maester to come in later to fix those stitches, that she’s resting. We’ll send for you, he tells the maester firmly. He kisses Dany's palm gently, his lips a light whisper above her wound. Barely enough to tickle, not enough to hurt. Her blood anoints his lips, and he hardly notices. We are taking care of her. 

Yes, Dany thinks, her eyes on Jon's face, his authoritative voice circling around them, certain she’s never loved him more. They are. Let them. As Arya pulls the sweaty mats from her hair and Jon wipes the sweat from her neck, she feels like she's being put back together. And for a second, it gives her hope; she imagines she can conquer this. But she knows there’s no true mending to be had here.

"I'm not much good at it, but I can do a single braid," Arya offers.

Dany inches further into Jon. He's holding her up now. She has a brief, terrible thought: will they be able to burn me? Will they be able to put me to rest properly? I don’t burn. What will become of me?

"A braid. Yes," she tells Arya, her heart heavy. If she's to rot, let her victory be with her.

Arya's hands are gentle as they weave her hair into one long, heavy braid. Jon pulls a dish of lavender rosehip oil from the bedside table and dips his finger into it, his gaze melding with Dany’s as he gently applies it to her cracked lips. The smell makes her think of the baths they used to take together. She feels warm.

Her body consumes her mind again soon after, and it continues on. And on. And on. Storms start and stop, start and stop. At one point, dizzy and confused, Dany becomes convinced that the storms are linked with her womb. One storm stops and another one starts. One contraction stops and another one starts. They both get stronger, they both get closer together. They both consume. In her confusion, Dany can no longer tell what time of day it is, if it's dark outside of the window because it's nighttime or dark because of the stormclouds. Yet it's okay, she's not frightened: there are moments between each bout of pain where she can lean her head against Arya’s shoulder and wind her legs with Jon’s. Moments where, between bouts of retching and moments of confusion, she can speak with them. They talk of nothing, but it’s everything to her. Arya’s mischievousness as a child
— Jon’s favorite childhood stories— the house with the red door and the lemon tree— tales of Bran’s adventurous streak— whispers of what Sansa used to be when she was hopeful and open-hearted— moments when Dany had thought Viserys truly loved her, moments when she truly loved him— Lady Catelyn’s cruelty towards Jon— Ned Stark’s unwavering loyalty and love— the darkness Jon was in before he was brought back to life—

She clings to each word they say, and she knows they cling to hers. These are the things she will take with her towards the darkness. It’s plenty. It’s more than she’s ever had before. It’s love.

The wringing ache has gripped her again, stronger this time, when she hears a word, probably the only word that could drag her mind from the quiet place the pain brings it to. Drogon.

“What do you mean?” Jon’s voice is sharp. “How so?”

Grey Worm is the one who answers. “He almost looks like he’s fighting himself. He’s distressed.”

Where is Lord Bloodraven? she had asked, over and over. Now she knows. He hasn’t been tormenting her because he’s been busy elsewhere. She wants to look at Jon and Arya and ask them if they understand what’s happening, but she can’t get the words past her pained gasps. Each gasp sounds closer to a wail now, and Dany brings her knees up and tries to grip them, thinking it will somehow help ease her pain, but she forgets about her hands. As she flexes her palms, she feels blood gush over her knees.

“You must stop!” she hears the maester cry. He sounds anguished. Stop what? Stop what? I can’t stop any of this. Not any of it.

She hardly feels the needle as he restitches part of her right hand. She looks at Jon. Nausea climbs up her throat so quickly that she barely has time to turn her face to the side. This time, when she heaves, absolutely nothing comes up. She can’t stop it— she heaves until the muscles in her back ache from the strain of it, until she feels painful pressure start building in her groin.

She looks back at Jon. He moves, going from the upper left corner of her vision, twisting to the lower right. She can’t follow it; it makes her sick, so she closes her eyes again.

“Drogon,” she says urgently. For a moment, she sees the sea, the waves angry and roiling. She feels Drogon's torment, his fear. He's fighting it. But Dany knows better than anyone that you can only fight Lord Bloodraven for so long before he wins.

“I know.”

Her body overtakes her mind once more. Get up, she tells herself. You need to get up. You need to get up. She doesn’t know why, but her legs twitch, and the pain is different now. It’s lower, it’s stronger, it’s pressure that makes her bear down without conscious thought to do so. I must get up. I must get up… I must fly...

“What are you doing?!”

She ignores Arya, struggling in her dizziness and weakness to slide to the edge of the bed. She grips her stomach and doubles over, gasping. Nobody bothers trying to scold her for using her hands.

“I have to go, I have to get up,” she says. The pain is massive— it’s a physical thing, something she thinks she can expel. Her body wants to— it’s telling her what to do, and nothing else matters.

“What?! Go where?! You’re not going to check on Drogon! Jon, stop her!”
She inches her feet to the floor. The maester tells her to get back in bed, and Jon too, but this is her and her body. This is them. And they don’t know what she needs like she does. She knows what to do—she’s always known.

“Dany—”

She pulls away from Jon’s restraining hand.

“I need to stand, I need to, I need to, I need to!” The words come out wedged between groans, begging. Please understand. Please know. Please.

She feels Jon take her elbows, and she fears he’s going to drag her back on the bed. But he doesn’t. He helps her stand instead, holding her upright as her legs shake so severely beneath her that it’s all she can do to keep from collapsing.

She feels momentary relief. Jon is holding nearly every bit of her weight up, but despite her weakness, this is what she needed. She lets her knees bend a bit, and this time when the pain returns, she chooses to bear down with it.

“No, no, not yet, not there!” the maester says. He grabs her arm. “It’s not time! Get back to the bed!”

“No!” Dany says. This is right. This is right.

He pulls on her arm. “You need to lie down, you’re not strong enough—”

“Don’t touch her again!” Jon booms. He tightens his hands on her arms, accepting more weight as she leans further into his support. “She wants this—I’m not going to let her fall! Go get the midwives! Now!”

I need this. I need this. Each time she pushes, it feels like she’s gathering up the vast pain and pushing it through a funnel, localizing it, controlling it. She couldn’t stop even if the maester got on his knees and begged her to. She can’t keep her eyes open, and she’s so faint she can’t feel her head at all anymore. She can only slightly feel the point where Jon’s hands make contact with her arms, but even that is dulled. Lyaella knows what to do, too, Dany thinks, and her heart swells with love. Even now. Even now.

She’s so absorbed in her body that the screams that suddenly pierce the air sound like something in a memory. They’re distant, faded. Her pulse has packed her ears, making every other sound little more than a muffled whisper.

“What was that?!” Arya cries.

Dany smells smoke. She hears a roaring sound thundering over the howling wind. Stop pushing, she thinks, and she does. The pain she had been working with has passed for a brief moment. She struggles to take on a bit of her own weight so Jon doesn’t have to, but she’s too woozy to rise more than a hair’s breadth. She’s throbbing everywhere. She feels like she’s burning. It’s the hottest she’s ever felt. Sweat pours from her worse than it ever had underneath the Essos sun. Standing in flames hadn’t felt close to this.

She hears more screaming— or maybe that’s her. She’s bearing down again, following the pain’s beckoning. Jon and Arya’s panicked conversation sounds so far it’s unintelligible. She thinks she hears Grey Worm at one point, but she isn’t sure. Screaming—crashes—thunder—cries—

“Dany,” Jon whispers urgently. He’s trembling behind her. “Something is wrong with Drogon. He’s trying to burn the sea. He’s breathing fire everywhere.”
She sags against him, sweating, gasping for air. She tries to open her eyes, but everything is tilted sideways. She closes them quickly before she retches again. “I know.”

Behind her closed lids, she’s there with Drogon (with Bloodraven). Or perhaps she never left him. She feels his torment, his confusion, his terror. *Burn them all*, Lord Bloodraven commands, but Drogon is fighting him. Dany sees the glory of his fire as it blazes down on the storm-tossed waves around them, never touching the boat, never doing more than turning to smoke as the rains and the seawater embrace its heat. And Lord Bloodraven is angry. His fury fills Dany, but from it, she wrings out only strength.

“He’s going to destroy the boat,” someone says to Jon. It sounds as if it comes from very far away. Her heartbeat echoes so loudly in her ears that she can’t determine who spoke. "He'll listen to you. Maybe seeing you will pull him from this madness. We'll stay with her."

Her strength gives way to terror at those words. She sinks down, nearly falling to the floor. Jon hoists her back up.

“Please don’t,” she cries. Her voice doesn’t even sound like her own. “Please don’t!”

*I can’t stand. I have to stand. I can’t stand. I need you here to take Lyaella. I need you here. You said you’d be here. I don’t need anything but myself and you.*

“What?” Jon asks, his voice choked with panic. "Don't what, Dany? What's wrong?"

*Don't go. Don't go.* She reaches back blindly, trying to touch Jon somewhere, anywhere— he can’t go—she just needs him— they can do this together— "Don't go, don't leave me!" *This is what he wants. This is what Bloodraven wants. He wants me alone with Lyaella. He wants me to be without you. He wants this.* "Drogon won’t—Drogon is—" she breaks off, her words turning to a groan. As she sinks back into the powerful sensations clutching her (*mindbodysoul, mindbodysoul, mindbodysoul*, she thinks, in sets of three), she thinks she can see through Drogon’s eyes for a moment. Through Bloodraven’s eyes. But then she bears down again, stronger this time, and relief rushes through her. It feels so good to do— so right— that everything else slips away.

Yet beyond the roaring in her ears, distantly, she hears Jon. She always hears him.

"I'm not going. I'm not leaving," Jon promises her. His lips press hard to the crown of her head. He only grips her tighter, and Dany has never felt more relieved. *Let me be with him,* she thinks, the thought desperate and aching. It aches more than her hands, more than her pelvis, more than her back. *Let me not be alone. Let me feel safe. Let Lyaella be safe. Let her be with him.*

Someone argues with him about staying below. Another voice chimes in, a new one, and they’re upset about something that’s just happened with the maester. What? When? Dany doesn’t know. Dany doesn’t care. Her whole world becomes what is happening inside her body. She leans further into Jon, grateful for his strength, trusting him with every bit of her weight. Trusting him in ways she has never trusted anyone before. The more she leans into him, the steadier he becomes. This time, when she bears down, it’s hard enough that light explodes behind her eyes, and her entire head throbs from the pressure of her pulse. She hears a keening noise that must be coming from herself, and she feels a fierce burning between her legs.

"—have to! He's going to burn us all!"

Time seems to thicken and slow. Delirious, lightheaded, Dany notices the smallest things: Jon's heartbeat pounding so hard in his chest she feels it clearly against her back. The sound of Arya chanting something beneath her breath— a song? A prayer? Distant shrieks of fear, Drogon roaring.
And the thunder...its booming fury grips the night air nearly as fiercely as Dany’s womb clenches within her.

"Let him, then," she hears Jon say, his words brimming with heat. "Dany doesn't burn."

But I’m burning now, she wants to say. She reaches to touch the flames she feels, but they aren’t flames at all. Between her legs, she feels the crown of her daughter’s head.

"Everybody else will! Including you! Lord Bloodraven already made the maester jump overboard, he’s made the midwives too ill to walk— what do you think he’s going to do to sabotage Daenerys and Lyella once he has full control of a dragon?!"

It should frighten her, but the words just can’t reach her. Nothing can override the importance of what is happening in her body, in this moment. Dany reaches up, weakly touching Jon’s hand where it’s clenched around her forearm. Her touch leaves blood behind; she doesn’t know when it happened, but her stitches pulled again, and blood pulses from her palm. For a mad moment, she’s consumed by genuine shock at the sight of her own blood: she can’t believe she has any blood left in her to bleed out.

She pulls his hand into hers. Her breaths are small and tight, stitched closely together, and Jon bends a bit at the knees as Dany pulls his hand down, down. She feels her blood, hot and slick, between her palm and the back of his hand. She takes his fingers, and she brings them between her legs, to the crown of their baby’s head. Princess Lyella. This is where her own crown will one day sit. I will never get to see her wear it.

He’s overcome. She feels it in the way his hand trembles, in the sudden weakness of his grip on her, in the tears choking his words.

"I love you," he weeps. Her heart twists in her chest. She can’t recall ever hearing him sound so moved. For a moment in time, despite it all, she feels powerful.

I love you, too. So very much. She isn’t sure if she says it or just thinks it. It doesn’t matter. That fact is visible in everything she does. It always has been. She knows, when she’s gone, her love will never be questioned.

He holds her destroyed hand in his for a moment longer. His breaths are nearly as gasping as hers. It had started here in this room, and it would end here. Strangely, that brings Dany some peace.

Her legs are quivering to the point of collapse now. He straightens, pulling his hand from hers, and holds her up as he had been before. She feels him kiss the corner of her mouth. His lips are wet with tears.

And then it’s just her and her body again. It’s different now— half of her wants terribly to race to the end— it’s so close— but her body tells her no. She pushes— stops. Pushes— stops. The pain is burning, the pressure unimaginable.

But her mind is free.

She sees everything. For a moment, she sees the shadow of the boat they’re on, barely visible through a curtain of inky rain and heaving waves. The sea is angry, pitch-black, the sky purple-black. Behind black clouds, the moon is nothing more than a dim glow. Lightning illuminates everything every couple of seconds, intermingled by the sudden flare of flames as Drogon burns everything except what Bloodraven is trying to torture him into burning. The flames turn to smoke as they hit the sea, curling into the air in a spiral as dark as Jon’s curls. She’s Drogon. She flies— he
flies. She suffers—he suffers. He's not going to let him win. He's not going to let him hurt her. His mother— Lyaella's mother—

She’s herself again, and she’s in the council room. “The only way to kill Lord Bloodraven is to kill the form he’s inhabiting. But he must be fully inhabiting it—he must have his consciousness fully inside the mind of that creature—and he must not see it coming. He must not have time to withdraw and go to a different host. That is the only way.”

“How do you take a being with a thousand and one eyes by surprise?”

“Well, you’d have to do what the enemy wants you to do. That’s what they won’t be expecting.”

She’s sitting beside Bran Stark’s body, but Bran Stark is not the one who is speaking. “When the sun rises in the west and sets in the east. When the seas go dry and mountains blow in the wind like leaves. When your womb quickens again, and you bear a living child—only then will you be free from me. Kill me—dash the eyes from my skull—and you will still feel my gaze wherever you are for as long as you live.”

For as long as I live, Dany thinks now. That won’t be much longer.

She’s got one foot in the present and one in the past. She’s herself in both places.

“And what was next?” Jon demands. “You have her burn King’s Landing and all its innocents—then what?”

“You know the answer to this one, Jon,” the Three-Eyed Raven tsks. “You can answer it yourself.”

The words fall dead from his lips, lifeless and empty. “I kill her. Somehow, I’m convinced to kill her.”

“Yes.”

She thinks of Jon’s voice right before they boarded the boat. “I didn’t understand what he was trying to tell me. Bran just kept saying ‘Ramsay, Ramsay. Like Ramsay’. Something about his weapons—his dogs. His own weapons…”

“Only a dragon can kill a dragon.”

Lord Bloodraven is a dragon, too. And right now—she is his greatest weapon against his greatest foe. She is the tool he’s going to use to destroy the Princess Who Was Promised. She is Ramsay’s dog, starved and imprisoned, preparing to feast. She’s his own weapon to use against him.

I’m in your head now, Bloodraven had told her, during one of her many nights of terror stuck inside her own head. You see me here in front of you? I’m as far in your head as you’ve ever been. You cannot escape me. We’re one.

The clarity is blinding, all-consuming. When she cries out, she’s not sure if it’s from the pain she feels as her child’s head stretches her open or from sadness.

I know what to do, she thinks again, trembling, her bloody hand going between her legs, gently cupping her baby’s scalp.

“She,” Kinvara affirms. She strokes Dany’s stomach softly. “But you knew that already, Daenerys.”
“Yes,” Daenerys agrees. “I knew from the start.”

“You know more things than you know you do. You always have. And so you know what must be done now, don’t you? Deep down, you know.”

She does. Just as she knows Drogon can’t keep Lord Bloodraven at bay forever, just as she knows that Lord Bloodraven is coming back to her next. As soon as her daughter slides from her body, he’ll find his way to her. And once he’s here, she can’t think about this anymore. He can’t know what is coming. She must let him into her mind completely—and then she must give him what he wants.

She cannot kill him. But she can kill herself and take him with her. She can protect Lyaela from him—she can save her. In many ways, she can save herself.

As she pushes and guides her daughter from her own body, Jon holds her up, never wavering once in his strength or steadiness. Though the boat is swaying so hard that Dany can hear things falling from the tables and shelves, he is immovable. It's one of the last blessings she will know. When her baby slides into her aching hands, all her strength leaves her. She collapses; someone, Arya, Dany thinks, catching the smell of cedarwood, helps to hoist her back up, keeping her from falling to the floor. Dany uses all the energy she has left to keep hold of her infant as Jon and Arya help her onto the bed. She stares down at her baby, clutched in her ruined hands, her vision blurred and shaking. She's bloody, slick, very tiny. Quiet.

“No,” Dany hears herself say. She feels the urge to retch again, but she fights against it. She’s too tired to even lift Lyaela up closer—she lets her bloody hands rest on her legs, Lyaela still clutched in her ruined palms. She’s shaking so hard that her grip on Lyaela nearly slips. She feels her heart jolt with terror. “Take her—take her—Jon—I’m going to drop her—take her—”

Dany can hardly keep her eyes open; her head feels heavier than she can bear, too hard to hold upright. She hangs on until she sees Jon's hands reach for Lyaela, lifting her to safety. Dany lays back on the bed, her head spinning. Her eyes close. She feels so cold...she wants to go to sleep. She wants to sleep. Not yet.

Lyaela is still quiet. Still attached to Dany by the umbilical cord. She feels a tugging deep within her with every step Jon takes with Lyaela. Her heart is beating in her throat now, and the effort it takes just to lift her eyelids is excruciating, but she must see her. She must. Keep going...keep going...not yet. Not yet. Keep going...

“Jon,” Dany begs. The sound of Drogon’s screams as he continues to fight Lord Bloodraven, the thunder, the rain—all of it is loud, but to Dany, it’s quiet as the grave. Because she doesn’t hear Lyaela. "Rub her back. Make her cry. Please, Jon, please..."

She struggles to lift her eyelids up, but she only manages a few quick glimpses at Jon and Lyaela. They're perched right beside her now, but she still can't reach them. She sees Jon's hand rubbing briskly at their daughter's tiny back. For a moment, her head drifting off to sea, all she can think about is how strong and huge his hands look in comparison to their tiny baby. How gentle he is.

A couple seconds later, she hears Lyaela sputter, and her first cry is strong and shrill. When Dany drags her eyelids up enough to look at them again, she sees Jon cradling Lyaela to his chest, his lips pressing to her bloody hair, his eyes drifting closed in deep, shaky relief. Dany finally lets her tears break through, but she doesn't even have the energy to sob. They slide from the corners of her closed eyes.

"Do you want to hold her now?" Jon asks. There's a heavy pause. "Gods...your hands, Dany..." His words are thick with pain. She can't look at him. And neither of them say anything about the blood
coating her thighs, the warm, ever-growing puddle beneath her.

"Put her on my chest," Dany says. She moves her quivering fingers down, searching for the hem of her blood-soaked night dress. She struggles to pull it up, her fingers too weak to grasp the fabric tightly enough. Her heart trembles in her chest, its erratic beats reminding her oddly of a weak cough. Barely there. "Help me. Please."

*I have to nurse her. I'm dying. She won't have anyone to nurse her. I have to...I have to...*

It's Arya who peels her dress from her bloody thighs, Arya who uses Dany's dagger to cut the ruined fabric free so that Dany doesn't have to try to sit up to pull it off.

"I'll find you something else to wear," Arya tells her, her voice shaking. "Something clean for when we arrive at Sharp Point." She turns her back to them, headed towards Dany's trunk. Her steps are unsteady.

Dany starts to tell her there's no point, that she won't ever leave this bed, but that would be unnecessary and cruel. She lets Arya do what she needs to do.

Jon carefully settles Lyaella between Dany's breasts. She uses every bit of her energy to lift her arm up. She rests one of her hands on Lyaella's back, her thumb gently stroking the minuscule ridges of her delicate spine. She feels Lyaella's tiny chest move against hers as she breathes. She tries to lift her head to kiss her hair, but she can't muster the energy. The mattress dips low as Jon leans over, cupping the back of Dany's head, helping to lift her enough that she can bring her lips to their daughter. She kisses Lyaella's hair. *Hair like mine*, she thinks, her heart swelling. *Like the women who came before us.*

The mattress is so wet with blood that it makes a squishing sound as Jon lays beside her. His forehead presses against her shoulder, his arms wrap around her. He hides his face against her arm. She feels the muscles in his jaw working as he tries not to weep. She wishes he would while she's still here to comfort him.

"She's got my hair," Dany says. Her voice is faint, but she knows Jon hears her just fine. "You were right."

He cries then, holding her desperately, his lips pressing to her arm, her shoulder, her collarbone. His grief could swallow her whole. But doesn't he see? If there were ever a better place to die, Dany can't imagine it. Can't picture it. She's here with him, with Lyaella. She's in the bed they fell in love in— the bed she just met their daughter in. Lyaella is breathing. She's healthy. She is beautiful. Dany can't take in enough of her: she studies her tiny nose, her thin eyelids, her bloody silver curls matted to her scalp. Her tiny chest, moving up and down— her tiny heart beating against Dany's. She holds her delicate hand in hers. It's perfectly made. *She* is perfectly made, from her hair to her toes. There is nothing monstrous about her. Not one thing. And when Jon helps move her closer to Dany's right breast, she roots and latches easily.

*She knows*, Dany thinks proudly, her eyes burning with tears. *She knows how to survive. She'll survive it all.*

Like me. *Like the women who came before me*, she thinks again, but this time, it's a thought tinged with sadness and fear. *Lord Bloodraven must never touch her. He must never haunt her as he did my mother, as he did me. I must protect her. I could not be protected. But she can be. I can save her. I must save her.*

She knows exactly what she has to do to save her. But right then, as she strokes her hair with a light,
trembling touch, she can't bear the weight of it. She thinks: *how can I possibly leave her? How can I possibly lose her— lose this?*

The wind howls. It makes her heart ache worse than she aches between her legs, worse than the throbbing in her hands. She knows, somehow, that Drogon is weakening. She feels it in the heavy dread curled in the pit of her stomach, in the exhaustion threaded through her mind. Like his mother, he is losing. And once he loses, Dany is out of time.

She had wanted this for so long. Lying there now, bleeding out quickly, knowing she's going to lose everything she has ever wanted, she *still* feels as if her body has been flooded with love. A perfect kind. The kind she had never received from anyone. The kind she wanted so terribly to give to her daughter.

She’s crying as she kisses Lyella's downy hair, her perfect hand, her tiny forehead. *This is the only time I will ever nurse her,* the weak part of her mind says. *Another woman will sing to her at night. I will never see her smile. She will never hear I love you from my lips.*

Knowing what must be done doesn’t make it easy. But knowing she’s going to die anyway eases the pain, the guilt. She knows what to do: she must get her dagger back, she must make sure that once Bloodraven is in her head, she dies quickly, before he can hope to get away. The way she's dying now is proving to be too slow; she can't risk him slipping out right before her life fully extinguishes. It must be a sudden death, unexpected. She must die before he realizes what she's done. He must be trapped in her dying mind, and she must extinguish him with her. She remembers Arya showing her where to sink the knife to hit someone's heart. *It's a quick death,* Arya had said. *Very effective.* Of course, she'd probably never imagined Dany would one day be using that technique on herself.

She knows what to do, but she doesn't know how. She doesn't know how to tell Jon goodbye. She doesn't know how to explain to him why and how this must be done, how to tell him she's sorry. How to tell him she'll miss him even in a place where there is no her, where there is no missing. She is too tired: she doesn't have the energy to do much more. So she does what she's always done when she's felt that way. She keeps going. She doesn't look back.

"It's okay," she tells Jon.

Those words make him tremble. She's not even sure if it's from sadness or rage.

"It's not," he says, his voice deep and tremulous. "It's my fault. It's my fault you're dying."

She feels his rage. It's aimed at himself. She turns her face to the side, her hand secure on Lyella's back as she nurses, and she kisses Jon's hair. His scalp is warm, the spiced scent of him comforting. She leaves her face hidden there for a time. It should feel frightening to hear someone finally admit it out loud, but instead, it feels soothing. Like a long-time secret being known and understood. Accepted.

"It's not," she manages. She kisses his hair again. She wants terribly to touch him, but her left hand is on Lyella, and her right pounds too hard to lift. She tries so hard to heft the words past her lips, so hard to say: *I can take Lord Bloodraven with me. I'm going to die anyway. I can take him with me. There's no other choice. If I don't kill him, he'll just go for you, or for Arya. He'll kill Lyella. And if he doesn't kill her, he'll torment her. We can't have either of those things happen to her. It stops now. It stops with me. I will end it.*

She finds three words instead. She can manage three words. "I love you," she says into his hair.

She knows when Lord Bloodraven overpowers Drogon. And everybody else does, too. The *boom!***
reverberates in Dany's bones, shrieks and screams following shortly after. And then the smell of smoke, stronger than before.

"We need to go," she whispers. He lifts his face from her shoulder and meets her eyes. She reaches up with bloody, trembling fingers. She combs her fingers through his curls, pulls the tie from his bun, touches his beard. Traces his lip. Her heart fills her entire chest. It's a good ache. "You need to go."

He can't be here. He can't see her die. She can't leave him with that. Pain won't be the last thing he feels by her hand.

Jon shakes his head at once. "No. No, I'm not leaving you."

She never imagined the only thing holding her back from death would be Jon Snow's love. It suddenly seems a foe too great to overcome. Let me go, she wants to beg. If I'm going to die, let me at least take down one more slaver. Let me at least die ensuring a future for our daughter—for you. For House Targaryen. For our family. For our people. Let me leave the world better than I found it.

Mercy finds her in the sound of Grey Worm's panicked voice, his fast-approaching footsteps. He pushes into the chambers.

"Jon," he begs, and then he falters, his eyes landing on Daenerys and Lyaella. The pain that floods his face is too great: she lets her eyes fall closed, unable to bear it. "Jon, Drogon set flame to the starboard side; the rain is keeping it from spreading too quickly, but we have to evacuate now. Can you walk, Queen Daenerys?"

Queen Daenerys. She loves him for that. She's lying in a bed soaked with her own blood, surely minutes from death, but to him, she's still a queen. Dany nearly laughs; it's all so absurd to her, especially the idea that she could get up again or walk again. But all she manages is a weak exhalation.

"It does not matter. I will carry you. We must go," he says urgently.

"And what happens when we're in the tender and Drogon breathes fire down on us?" Arya asks. "On the baby."

"He won't—" Jon is interrupted.

"He could! We know now what Lord Bloodraven is capable of! I know you don't want to leave her, but someone has to do something about Drogon, and you're the only one he might listen to. We can't take her or your daughter out there until we know it's safe—"

"IT WILL NEVER BE SAFE!"

Their arguing grows hazy. Dany falls into herself. She knows nothing beyond the sound of her own pulse pounding in her head and the flutter of Lyaella's heart against her breast, nothing beyond the darkness cloaking her eyes. Not yet, she thinks desperately. She thinks she's dying. She can't die yet. She has to kill him. She has to…

Sudden agony squeezes her brain, and confusion pierces through her. Wasn't the darkness soft? She remembered it being soft. This isn't soft. This hurts. But it makes sense quickly. Daenerys, she hears, and the voice sends terror flooding Dany's body, but she's too tired to move. It's as if he's rendered her paralyzed again, and in a way, he has. He's the one who left her standing in that puddle of blood, Longclaw buried so deep in her hands the blade touched the bones in the backs of her hands. Had that never happened, she would have made it through this. She would have. He had killed her.
Daenerys, I’m coming to meet the princess.

No, she thinks, begs. She can hear the dim sound of Jon, Arya, and Grey Worm yelling. She smells smoke. Her daughter is still on her chest. No. Please. No.

The agony builds and builds— until Daenerys feels her womb tightening again, as tight and wringing as before. Her heart takes flight as the agony of that floods her mind, washing out Bloodraven’s torment. She clings to it, savoring every twisting ache, because she knows he’s not strong enough. She knows he’s not half the person she is.

And for a moment, she thinks she’s won. He edges out of her brain as her body takes over. Going where, she doesn’t know. Right then, she doesn’t care. Dany hears herself laugh as she bears down again, the sound triumphant and breathless, but she can’t stop it. She’s happy in that short moment of victory. Happy to have him out of her head, even if only for the time it takes her to finish the birth. Happy to have bought Lyalla a couple more moments of safety, a couple more moments with her.

But then she hears Jon’s sharp intake of breath.

"No," he says, panicked, frightened. Agonized. "No! No! No!"

His voice overwhelms everything else. She hardly feels the afterbirth leave her, hardly notices the new rush of blood that soaks the mattress between her legs. She holds Lyalla securely to her chest and struggles again to sit up. She makes it halfway before she grows so dizzy she falls back down onto her back, her vision careening so quickly nausea swells once more.

“Jon,” she calls. She can hear him groaning, crying out, she can hear Arya asking him what’s wrong, Grey Worm calling his name— she’s never felt so helpless. She can’t do anything. She can’t do anything. He’s going to take Jon. He’s going to kill him. And Lyalla will have neither mother nor father, and then he’ll kill her, and all of this will have been for nothing. I can’t do anything.

But she can.

She looks down at her daughter. Her cheek is smushed over Dany’s breast, her eyes still shut, her hands closed into soft fists.

*How much strength do I have left in me?* Daenerys wonders. It's hard to know with her lifeblood surrounding her. With her head swimming. With her whole body weaker than it’s ever been before. She thinks the strain of fighting with Lord Bloodraven might kill her at once, but she can’t let him hurt Jon. She can't. She must protect him, and she must protect Lyalla. Her family.

She knows that if Bloodraven wants to physically harm Lyalla, Jon is a much better target than she is. Dany doesn’t even have the strength to hold her own head up; there is little she could truly do to harm her newborn, no matter how deranged Bloodraven made her. Despite that, Dany knows Bloodraven. She knows that he’ll come to her simply because he won't be able to resist it. He's proven that time and time again.

“You failed,” she whispers. She knows he’ll hear, even above Arya and Grey Worm’s panicked questions to Jon. Even above Jon's anguished screams. “You failed.”

She’s speaking of Drogon. Of Lyalla. He couldn’t get Drogon to turn on his mother. He couldn’t get her to turn on Lyalla. He had failed. Their love was stronger than his fear, their weaknesses greater than his strengths.

*Come on, she thinks. Jon is howling in pain now. Arya is crying. Aren’t you going to say goodbye to me? Aren’t you going to come meet Princess Lyalla of House Targaryen?*
She anticipates the pain. She embraces it when it comes. Like the pain that had gripped her womb, she works with it, not against it. She clutches it, dragging it into her mind, holding it tight. She holds him there in her thoughts—it takes more effort than anything else has all night, but she can’t stop now. She’s almost there. She’s almost home.

She pushes Bloodraven into a small part of her mind, guarding her thoughts as much as she can. She knows from experience that it won’t be much, and not for long. She can hold him here, keep him paralyzed and blind, but never for long. Never for more than a minute or so.

The pain in her head is gnawing. She can hear Bloodraven’s voice at the back of her mind. *Let me in…I’ll get in in the end, you know I will, and I won’t be happy...you know how I hate your fuss. Didn't you learn the last time? Didn't you?*


Arya, her sister, comes to her side. It is the final blessing. Dany looks up at her dark eyes. Jon’s eyes. She has so much she wants to say, but not enough energy to say any of it. She wants to ask Arya to tell Lyella all the things she’d needed to hear from Rhaella in her own darkest moments: *I believe in you. You’re strong enough.* She wants to tell Arya to tell Lyella the answer to the question she herself had wondered all her life, the question that she would have asked her mother if she ever got the chance to see her again. *Was it worth it? Was I worth it?*

She’d tell Arya to tell Lyella that she was. That she would do it all again.

But she has neither energy nor time. The pain in her head becomes so vast it overshadows the throbbing soreness between her legs, the pulsating ache in her hands. She can feel him at the edges of every thought, at the back of her throat. He tastes of cloying patchouli.

“She doesn’t see how her words affect Arya. Her eyes drift closed again. She struggles against the pressure building in her head. *Not yet. Not yet. Not yet. Please. Please. Please.*

It’s the biggest test of trust Daenerys has ever given. If Arya doesn’t understand what Daenerys needs, if Arya doesn’t save her, they will lose everything. They will lose Lyella. He’ll never stop. Not ever. She can only hope that Arya sees that…that she knows…*please*…

The cold heft of the dagger against her bloody, destroyed palm sends tears surging down her cheeks. Relief unlike any she has ever felt blooms within her. Arya curls Daenerys’s fingers around the handle of the dagger, her own hand shaking against Daenerys’s.

“Thank you,” Daenerys breathes, too weak to say much else. Who knew, after all this time, she would finally find people who would protect her. “Thank you.”

Daenerys’s second-to-last action as herself is to look down at her daughter. She forces her eyelids up, still struggling beneath the weight of Bloodraven pinching and prying at every defense, and she takes in the sight of Lyella. She waits. And then she feels him edge in, a slinking shadow. With him, anxiety and fear. She has moments to act.

She looks at Arya.

“Take her,” she begs, her words hardly more than a breath. Her chest is full of panic. She wants to scream, but she can’t. “*Take her!*” she tries to yell, yet it is only a whisper.
Arya understands.

She pulls Lyaella off Dany’s chest, and as soon as she’s gone from her, Daenerys feels an emptiness that has no name. Her heart is gone: it pumps inside Lyaella’s body now. Dany only has darkness. She fumbles with the heavy weight of the dagger, dragging her arm up slowly, painstakingly. She turns it— her wrist gives out two times, but she tries again and again, until she can hold it steady.

“What is she doing?” Grey Worm demands. “Let go of me! What is she doing?!”

(Distantly, feeble: "Dany...")

“She's saving her.”

“How is that saving her?! How is that— no! No!”

Dany presses the tip of the dagger over the spot her heart used to be. She only hopes she’ll have enough energy to drive it in. It will be her last independent choice, her last action as Daenerys. She can only hope she’s strong enough.

“It’s okay,” she tells Grey Worm. The words twist through her mind. They are her last. In Valyrian: “It’s okay. We begin again.”

As Lord Bloodraven forces himself in, she lets up every bit of her resistance, and she lets him take over fully in the way he only ever manages when she’s asleep.

She’s with him. She’d known she would be. He’s selfish, lustful, evil— he thinks nothing of pulling her deep into their shared visions, nothing of skipping over what usually proceeds that: him peeking through her eyes, him viewing her current reality. He thinks he knows her current reality. He doesn’t.

She’s Shiera Seastar, but she’s not. Lord Bloodraven smiles at her as he grabs her hands. He lifts her palms up, kissing each one, and then he laughs— a deep, echoing sound.

“How did it feel? Did it hurt?”

She does not answer. She can’t think of why. She can’t think of anything. She’s got a secret, but he mustn’t know it.

“I do hope they’re able to save you. I would rather keep you here than let your god take you. You were made for this earth— this hell.”

Maybe she was. She’s certainly felt its hellfire in full all her life.

But she does not burn.

“As soon as they give you the baby to nurse, you’ll slit her throat, and a new reign can begin. Are you excited?” He smiles again. He reaches down and sets his hand on her stomach. And it’s not her own— but somehow, it’s still tender. “I am.”
“Dany! Dany—”

Jon’s voice. It pulls her back into her mind for just one second— she smells thick smoke, she hears Lyaella crying, she feels the way her body aches— but she feels something else in her hand, and because of that, her mind feels strong— she is strong—

She’s herself, and she’s in control.

This is her favorite memory. It’s her turn to torment Lord Bloodraven.

She’s standing at the window in her chambers, casting her eyes over the moonlit sea. She hears a knock at the door. She turns.

She’s expecting it to be Lord Tyrion, but she’s hoping it’s Jon Snow. When she opens it to reveal him — standing there with an anxious sort of buzz about him, an eagerness set deep in his eyes that makes her heart flutter— she feels something deep within her stir, a sort of apprehension she hasn’t felt in a very long time. A good one.

He says nothing. He doesn’t need to. She knows why he is here, and she knows that it could all turn bad— she knows that taking him into her bed could hurt her politically and emotionally. She knows that it could be a mistake, that she could look back one day and decide, yes, today was the beginning of the end.

But as they look at each other, she doesn’t care. She doesn’t care. All the things she loves about him — his strength, his honor, his eyes, his smile— are stronger than any fear she could feel. Than any hypothetical future threat. She wants him. She wants all of him. More than she has ever wanted anyone before.

She slowly pushes her door open, her eyes never leaving his. As he walks into her chambers, she feels the urge to shiver. He stands in front of her, his gaze brimming with an energy she can’t name, but she feels it quivering around her heart, thudding between her thighs. And he shuts her door.

They observe each other for only a second more, both their chests rising and falling quicker than they ought to be. And then he steps forward, taking her face gently in his hands, his body pushing her back against the door he’d just shut. His lips pressing to hers.

She thinks, at that first taste, that she will never want to taste a man other than him ever again. She unfurls for him, her lips parting, her heart wide. As she pulls her hands through his hair, he groans at the back of his throat, and his hands are on her dress clasps— her hands are at his buckle— she feels alive, there’s so much blood pulsing through her body, so much heat, so much energy—
Bloodraven has her by the throat. They’re on Dragonstone. She’s her.

“If you ever try that again, I’ll—”

She’s in her second favorite memory now.

Jon is swaying her through the boisterous crowd, her body pressed fully to his, his smile hidden into her hair.

He is her husband. She is his wife. Nothing in the world has ever made her happier.

When she looks over his shoulder, she sees Lord Bloodraven there. For once, he looks frightened. Confused. But if they are one, if his mind is tied to hers, she can absorb him just as he absorbs her. He hadn’t realized that. He underestimated her. Men always do.

“See how I love him?” Dany asks, kissing Jon’s shoulder, smiling as one of Jon’s hands presses to her lower back, tugging her closer— almost wickedly close. “I love him in my bed, yes, I showed you that. But this is how I love him. I’ve taken him as mine. I said yes. I will never sleep with anyone but him again— I am his. His. You’ve never been loved like this, have you? Hundreds of times you begged your beloved to marry you. She didn’t see you worthy. But you were worthy enough to warm her bed. Really, even if you never realized it, you were little more than her favorite bedsclave.”

He’s furious. Dany feels true pain— she knows, in order for her to feel it here inside her mind, it must be excruciating in reality.

“Now,” Dany says, rubbing her cheek affectionately over Jon’s heart. She feels the thick texture of his scar even through the layers of his clothing. He came back. The Lord of Light wasn’t done with him yet. Maybe, just maybe, he wouldn’t be done with her, either. “What were you saying before, bastard? You said, if I ever tried this again, you’d…what? Do it, if you’re man enough.”

His face contorts in rage. Dany’s agony pulls her mind apart— her memories break into thousands of pieces— it hurts, it hurts, it hurts.

But it’s what she wanted.

For just a moment, she’s Daenerys Targaryen again. She tightens her hand around the dagger, but she’s so weak that the point of the blade slips, and her hand falls. No, she thinks, pleads, begs. No. Please.

Somebody hears her. She feels another hand join hers, guiding, helping, and she can’t even focus enough to tell who it is— but she knows they love her. They love her.
With the help of that extra hand, she drives it into her own heart.

*Oh,* she thinks. She feels a tiny thrill of surprise— it’s her last emotion. *It hardly hurts.*

“*What did you—*”

 She’s Lord Bloodraven, and he’s trying hard to escape. He’s picturing the sharp angles and dark browns of Arya Stark’s mind. He’s trying to claw his way out of Daenerys’s— he can feel the essence of her unraveling, like the floor giving out beneath him, the soft violets and the burning reds of her mind turning to iridescent ash— but she’s too far gone. He’s entwined with her— and she doesn’t have the strength— and neither does he.


Daenerys is laughing. Jon Snow’s beard burns and tickles the delicate skin of her neck as he kisses her. Her entire body is encased in toe-curling heat.

“You’re sure it’s okay that I stay?” he asks her, breaking his lips from her skin. “I think Lord Tyrion is beginning to suspect, and Ser Davos certainly does. It might make things complicated when we get to Winterfell...”

He’s out of breath, his cheeks flushed. Dany nearly groans from the intensity of the affection that floods her at that sight. She lifts her face up and catches his lips with hers, kissing him deeply, hooking her legs around his hips.

“Yes,” she tells him. He smiles into their kiss. “Yes...”

“*Yes.*”

Lord Bloodraven observes King Aegon. The verdict doesn’t surprise him. Over the few conversation they’d had together in the time he was confined to the dungeons, he had been impossible to sway.

You acted dishonorably, *Aegon told him.* You invited Aenys Blackfire here for the Great Council and swore him safe conduct— and then you beheaded him. House Targaryen needs no poison such as this in their blood.

I did it to protect House Targaryen, *he’d insisted.* I have always fought for House Targaryen— always. House Blackfyre is the poison, that’s what we must do away with— can’t you see—
I see that you are the bastard we always knew you to be. Your father never should have legitimized you—he never should have given you a true name. You’ll never be a true Targaryen.

Now, he stands stoic as the council condemns him to exile.

“You will take the black for the rest of your days.”

He smiles. Cold, calculating.

“And many days those will be. May you and those who come after you always sleep soundly, Your Grace, beneath my thousand and one eyes.”

“I can’t be.”

Daenerys shakes her head, her hand pressed to the nearly indiscernible swell of her lower abdomen. Her heart is pounding in her chest. She is so afraid to hope, so afraid that she feels sadness where she should feel joy.

“I can’t,” she insists again, turning to look at Missandei.

Missandei steps over. She laces her fingers together and looks at Dany with a steady, calming look that always makes things seem easier to handle.

“It seems you can, Your Grace,” she tells her.

Dany shakes her head again. There are other things that could make her breasts tender, her stomach tender, her blood missing. There must be.

“I can’t,” she repeats. It’s hardly above a whisper now.

Missandei smiles softly. She touches Dany’s hand, and Dany takes hers at once, clinging tightly. She feels she might float away. How could this be happening? She must be dreaming. She must be dreaming.

“I’ve never known anything to be impossible for you.”

He’s making love to her.

“Aegor,” she moans into his shoulder, and then she laughs and bites into his skin. Their half-brother’s name.

He rolls off of her and shoves her away, hard, his rage a blind fury. He reaches out and twists her silver hair around his fingers, yanking fiercely, his jealousy filling his chest up until there’s no room for anything else.
“Why do you do this?!”

He almost wants to cry. He tells himself it’s the rage.

Shiera laughs again. Her eyes, green and blue, twinkle darkly. When she cranes her neck up and kisses him, it’s sadistic. Cutting. Cold.

“You’re nice for right now, but you’ll never be enough.”

“What if he doesn’t want me to?"

“Then I’ve enjoyed your company, Jon Snow,” she says lightly. She waits until he’s rounded Rhaegal uncertainly, and then she turns her face, hiding her smile.

He struggles to climb up, nearly slipping and falling off the dragon into the snow at one point, but finally, he’s seated awkwardly upon Rhaegal. Dany takes a moment to look at them, her heart swelling in her chest. Do you know? she wants to ask him. Do you know that I love you?

“What do I hold onto?” Jon demands.

It’s all she can do not to laugh again.

“Whatever you can.”

He manages it as she knew he would, gripping Rhaegal tightly, and Rhaegal shoots off eagerly, streaking into the sky just as his brother does with Dany. Dany waits a moment, watching them fly off. She lets her smile break through, bright and true. She feels as if her heart has taken flight with them.

He has only been at the Wall for a week when he first hears the voice, dark and booming in his own mind.

A man in hell is a man in chains. A man who rules hell is a king.

Nothing frightens him anymore. He’s dove so deep into blood magic and sorcery that nothing is unexpected. He sets the fire tongs down and turns so his back is to the fire. He smiles.

“Well, if anyone should be the king of hell, it’s a Targaryen,” he says.
Jon’s rubbing her back. She’s half asleep, lulled to a deep state of contentment by his touch, the warmth of the bed, the crackling sound of the fire. His voice is quiet, soft.

“Dany?”

She turns her face to the side and looks at him. The firelight puddles on his cheeks; he looks more beautiful than ever.

“I’m proud of you,” he tells her.

Her eyes drift shut as she smiles.

He makes a temporary home in Bran Stark’s mind, and he waits.

While he waits, he watches, and everything he sees makes him sick. His failures with Rhaella and Aerys are clear: despite all he tried to do, they continued on, bringing forth into the world the pieces that would come to orchestrate his downfall. His successes—all their children he disposed of—matter little when Daenerys and Rheagar Targaryen still survived. And the fruits of Rhaella Targaryen’s labor seed him with rage.

He watches it all unravel. He watches it, a slow-approaching inferno.

He sees Jon Snow, once a bastard as he himself was, fall into Daenerys Targaryen’s bed. He sees the love they share each night on their trip back to Winterfell. He sees their future—their family—the reign they will have—the peace they will bring—the downfall of him and the one that strengthens him—all the yeses she will give him—and he is set aflame.

“What you said the other day…Lyaella. I like it.”

Jon lifts his brows at that. He smiles a second later, his arms looping around her waist, bringing her to him. He kisses her. “Just when I thought Princess Zaldrīzes-zokla of House Targaryen had the right ring to it…”

She laughs. And she kisses him. Again, and again, and again.

Every night, in Bran Stark’s body or in any other, he burns. Her name burns through his veins, pollutes his heart. His love is equal parts affection and hatred. He never knows which side the coin will land each time he dreams of her.
He only knows that he never had her, and he never will.

“I am his, and he is mine. From this day, until the end of my days.” She loves him, she loves him, she loves him—

He loves her, he hates her—he loves her.

Jon—

Shiera—

Lyaella.

The darkness opens up to her, beckoning softly.

The door is red.
He feels as if his head has only just hit the pillow when the sound of howling wakes him.

It echoes through the Maidenvault, bouncing off the stone walls and floors, filling every void and every heart with dread. It is a wrenching sound, loud, unforgettable. Unrelenting.

Ser Davos has only heard it one other time in his life.

He pulls his aching bones off the bed and yanks a cloak on hurriedly. He shoves his feet into his boots and flies from his chambers, hurrying down the stairs towards the courtyard, towards Ghost.

He’s not the only one disturbed by the sound.

“What’s wrong with him?” Lord Tyrion demands. He comes up to Ser Davos’s side. Davos shakes his head.

“I don’t know,” he says. His heart is deeply uneasy. For a moment, all he can see is Jon’s dead body on that table, rigid and cold. “But something has gone wrong. Something isn’t right.”

They’ve just reached the door to the courtyard when they hear Sansa’s voice echoing behind them.

“What’s happened to Ghost?” she calls. “Is that him whimpering?”

Lord Tyrion stops and turns to wait for her, but Ser Davos keeps going. He walks forward, headed towards the mournful sounds the direwolf is making, his heart inching down with every step that he takes. When he finally gets to Ghost’s enclosure, he stands just outside the gate and stares. He feels as if his heart has turned inside out. No, he thinks. Please.

“What…” Sansa trails off, surprised. “Has Ghost done that?”

He hears a clang of metal, and a second later, Sansa approaches with one the torches from a nearby wall. She leans over the gate of the enclosure and holds the torch out, bathing Ghost’s temporary home in brighter light than it had been before. She inhales sharply as she gets a closer look at the destruction.
“What is wrong with him?” she asks Ser Davos.

Ser Davos stares at the drops of blood on the hard ground where Ghost has been digging furiously. He’s dug into buried debris, some of which either pierced the pads of his paws or tore his nails. Some drops are blood are closer to the size of a small puddle; the flickering light from Sansa's torch reflects in the dark surface of them. And Ghost...he paces his enclosure, panting heavily, blood-red eyes wilder than Ser Davos has ever seen. With every step he takes, he leaves blood behind.

“Has Lord Bloodraven gone into his head?” Tyrion asks. He sounds afraid. “But Daenerys isn’t even here. The baby isn’t even here. Why would he target Ghost now?”

Lord Bloodraven has been their concern for a long while now, but Ser Davos knows that isn’t what’s happening now. This isn't Bloodraven: it’s much worse than that. He can hardly breathe around the emptiness consuming his chest. It hurts. For a moment, all he can picture are the queen and king’s smiles on the night of their wedding, their radiant faces illuminated with firelight not unlike the torchlight being reflected now in Ghost's spilled blood. He feels the corners of his mouth twitch down, but he fights it.

“No,” Ser Davos answers faintly. His eyes burn. “I don’t think this is Lord Bloodraven’s doing.”

They stand in a tense silence and watch Ghost. He alternates between howling and whimpering into the night, furiously digging into that same spot with his bloody paws as if he thinks he can tunnel from the enclosure, and pacing in mad, restless circles. As he paces, he pants so hard that drool falls in long strings from his jowls. He is crazed without doubt, but Ser Davos knows this is no madness from the Three-Eyed Raven. This is grief.

“What should we do?” Sansa asks. “His paws are hurt.”

“I don’t think anyone should go in there with him,” Tyrion says uneasily. “He looks...”

He doesn’t have to finish. It’s clear to all of them.

“We have to do something,” Sansa insists. “He’s going to hurt himself worse...Ghost! Ghost, stop digging!”

Ghost can’t hear anyone or anything. He’s lost in a grief as fierce as complete madness. Ser Davos knows he will dig until he truly cannot any longer, no matter the injury he causes himself. He will dig until he is free, no matter the cost.

“Let him out,” Ser Davos orders. He turns away from Ghost as Ghost begins whimpering again. He can’t stand the sight of it. He can’t stand the sound of it. I told you not to go. I told you. I told you not to go. Damn you. Damn you both. “Let him go.”

“Let him out?!” Tyrion echoes. “I can’t see how that’s a clever idea.”

Ser Davos brings his hand up to his forehead. Every breath hurts, and there’s an aching building behind his eyes. He thinks it might be tears.

“Just let him out. He won’t stop until you do.”

“We don’t know where he’ll go! We can’t just have an unhinged direwolf roaming King’s Landing —”

Ser Davos interrupts him. “He won’t. Because he’s going with me. We’re going to Dragonstone. At once.”
There’s a pause in the conversation that’s filled with the sound of Ghost crying in long, whimpering yelps. Has an animal ever sounded so sad? Ser Davos doesn’t think he sounded like this the last time. Right now, with the way Ghost is crying, Ser Davos half expects him to suddenly speak. His grief sounds deeply human.

“I don’t think Ghost is *that* injured,” Sansa finally says. “We can just send a raven to Jon. They should be arriving at Dragonstone tomorrow evening.”

“Lady Sansa is right,” Lord Tyrion says at once. “You’re needed here, Ser Davos. Queen Daenerys and King Jon are counting on your help here, not on Dragonstone. Should they need you, they’ll send for you.”

Ser Davos’s eyes close at that. His grandmother had once said that every time you speak the name of the dead, they touch your heart for a moment. He searches his own chest for an icy touch. He feels only heaviness.

Sansa senses his anguish. “What is wrong, Ser Davos?”

He can’t look at them.

“The last time I saw Ghost like this, Jon Snow was dead.”

Ghost consumes the silence once more, this time with loud, echoing howls. *Who is he calling to?* Ser Davos wonders. None of his litter mates are here with him. Perhaps his master no longer exists anywhere. *Who is he crying out to?*

“That doesn’t mean anything,” Lord Tyrion says at once. But his voice is tense.

“Ghost could easily just be upset about something the Three-Eyed Raven tried to do to him. Or he could be ill,” Sansa adds. “It doesn’t mean that Jon is dead…”

“No,” Ser Davos agrees. He turns to look at them. “It doesn’t mean that *Jon* is. It means that either Jon is— or someone he cares so deeply for that his direwolf feels the pain of it across the sea is.” He feels old then. Older than he ever has before. He just wants to go back to sleep. How many times must he lose those he loves as his own? How many children must he bury? “Either way, I should be there.”

When they release Ghost, he bolts straight towards the docks. He’s little more than a streak of moonlight through the darkness.

His mournful howls swell throughout King’s Landing all night long.

II.

Jon doesn’t remember leaving the boat.

He doesn’t know how he got from their smoke-filled chambers. He doesn’t remember traveling the corridors. He can’t recall them lowering the tender to the water or climbing into it. He doesn’t remember grabbing the gown clutched in his fist.

His blood-soaked fist.

He slumps to the left. His head is full of aching pain, but it’s more than his brain that hurts him. The pressure in his chest is suffocating. Intolerable. For a moment or so, he stops trying to push his lungs against the weight bearing on his heart. For a moment, he doesn’t breathe at all.
He doesn’t remember the path they took from the burning ship. But he remembers his wife, bound in a blood-soaked blanket, limp in Grey Worm’s arms. Her bloody braid trailing the floor as he carried her.

Jon can’t hold himself upright. When his fingers touch the water, he hardly cares that he’s lying halfway out of the boat. He opens his eyes. Stares at the dark, murky water, inky beneath the frail light of the moon. It has stopped storming. If he’s looking into the water, he’s not looking in the boat. It has stopped storming. If he’s not looking in the boat, he’s not seeing it. It’s stopped storming. If he’s not seeing it, it’s not real. It’s stopped storming. It's stopped. It's stopped.

“Your Grace.”

He has no grace. He is no king. The only thing that ever made him one is gone.

He leans further towards the water. The edge of the wooden rowboat digs into his chest. He wants to press it so far in that it cuts him in half. Then, he thinks, some of this pressure will be gone. Then, he thinks, this will be over. It finally stopped storming. The moon has come out. He feels nausea take root and swell within him. Dany, he thinks, his heart twisting into pieces inside his chest. It finally stopped storming.


The baby. Jon closes his eyes; the sound of her sobs suddenly pierces the air and refracts around his sore brain, knocking into every repetitive thought. It's stopped storming-- the baby. It's stopped-- the baby. The baby. Some part of his mind knows that she's been crying the entire time, but it's the first time he truly hears it. Every wail from Lyaella adds another stone atop Jon’s heart. He doesn’t think he’ll ever be able to move again.

"The baby needs you. Take her from Arya.”

No. Lyaella doesn’t need him. She needs her mother. The woman lying at their feet, wrapped in a blanket she’d just slept under a day ago. In Jon’s arms. She had been there. Alive, warm. Alive. Here. He can’t look. He can’t.

It is his fault. And he will not hold Lyaella. Not with her mother’s blood on his hands.

“Jon!” Grey Worm says again, sharper this time. “Lyaella.”

He can’t do it. He isn’t strong enough. Not like her. He can’t.

But he is anyway. He feels his spine straighten, his body turn towards his baby. His sister is still holding her. She’s been holding her since she was pulled from her mother’s breast. She carried her from that ship. Jon can’t remember it.

As he looks at Arya, he understands Grey Worm’s insistence: Arya appears to be seconds away from vomiting. She is still staring at Dany’s body. Jon’s not sure she’s looked away once since they began rowing. Jon can’t look at all, and she can’t look away.

Jon leans forward on the wooden bench and reaches for his daughter. She’s wrapped in Jon’s crimson cloak, but he suddenly fears that she’s cold anyway. For a second, that’s all he can think about: getting Lyaella, making sure she’s warm. But Arya doesn’t seem to realize he’s reaching for the baby. She doesn’t move. She holds Lyaella the same as she was, though her body is beginning to tremble.

“Arya,” Grey Worm calls. “Give the baby to Jon.”
Arya leans forward just a bit, but not enough. Jon is forced to scoot to the end of the bench. As he leans forward, his toes press against Daenerys. Still. Unmoving. He feels his stomach rip itself inside out. It’s all he can do not to drop Lyaella as he finally takes her.

Having his daughter pressed to his chest should comfort him, but it only opens up another well of sorrow. He cradles her close, his nose running along her scalp. She’s still got blood on her. Dany’s blood. And so does he. They are covered in it. His clothes are stiff with it. It’s beneath his nails, in his hair. It’s all that’s left of her.

Jon wraps the blood-soaked cloak he’s wearing around himself and his daughter. He shifts her slightly so that her little ear is resting over his heart. *It must be so strange to her,* Jon thinks, *to not hear Dany’s heart anymore. She lived beneath that sound for her entire existence. She must be so lost without its thrumming. I am, too.* Lyaella’s cries dwindle off quickly, growing quieter with each beat of Jon’s heart, until she’s calm for the first time since she was pulled off her mother’s chest.

Jon catches movement from the corner of his eye. He turns and watches as Arya doubles over. Jon expects her to vomit, but after a moment of breathing heavily, her head held between her knees, she slides from the bench instead. She kneels beside Daenerys’s body, and as her hands go to the blanket encasing her, Jon feels his heart snap shut.

“What are you doing?!” he demands. His voice is angrier than he’d expected it to be. Is he angry? He isn’t sure. He can’t name the heaviness in his chest. It’s like nothing he’s ever felt before. “Don’t — stop!”

He tries to reach out and smack Arya’s hand away from his wife— because she’s pulling the blanket open, exposing her body to the cold breeze. She’ll be cold. She’ll freeze. “Stop!” he demands again, and he feels a strand of anger unweave itself from that dark, heavy strain on his heart. It could wrap around someone’s throat if he let it.

Jon’s hand clutches Arya’s shoulder, his grip hard. With his other hand, he keeps Lyaella tucked securely over his racing heart.

“Stop!” he says again, his voice furious, desperate. *I can't see her still face. I can't. Don't make me. Please.*

Arya snatches her shoulder out of his grip. She pulls something from around her neck. Jon recognizes what it is at once, and his head swims with dizziness. Dany’s dress. The dress Arya had picked for her to put on for when they got to Sharp Point.

He understands what she’s doing now.

“Don’t,” he begs again, this time softer. He can’t bear it. He can’t bear any of it. He can’t bear to see Arya dressing her lifeless body. He thinks the pain of that might kill him.

“I have to,” Arya says. Her voice is hollow. “I won’t have her seen like this. She’s the queen. We’re not letting people see her like this.”

Drenched in blood. Hands ripped to shreds. Naked, her silver hair crimson. A dagger buried in her chest. No. Arya is right. He knows she is, but he still has to look away. And he cannot help her.

He hides his face into Lyaella’s hair. The smell of blood overwhelms him, but he can’t lift his face. He breathes through his mouth and gently strokes Lyaella’s back. Lulled by his heart beat, the warmth of his embrace, and the gentle rocking of the boat, she drifts to sleep quickly. Jon wishes he could follow her.
He doesn’t look up again until he hears Arya sit back on the creaky bench. She sits there for a moment, eyes staring blankly across the sea, and then she twists to the side, leans over the side of the boat, and vomits.

The dagger rests in her lap. The gems on the handle twinkle feebly in the bright light from the moon. Arya wipes the vomit from her mouth with a shaking hand, lifts the bloody dagger, and hurls into the sea.

*Throw Longclaw in, too*, Jon thinks, his eyes dropping to Arya’s hip, where Longclaw has been since Dany’s injury. *It’s just as responsible. It killed her, too. I killed her.*

Jon hides his face into Lyella’s hair again. Dany’s hair. All that’s left of her.

It has stopped storming.

III.

“Wake up. There’s a ship.”

Jon isn’t asleep. He doubts he will sleep ever again. He’s hiding inside his head. But when he looks up and sees the sun rising, he realizes he’s been hiding there for quite a long time. All night long. Lyella slept over his heart, and he hid. Like a coward. He is a coward.

The other tender floating a little ways ahead of them, the only other boat they had on their ship, carries what remains of the people who journeyed with them— Jon can’t even remember who that is. They are headed towards the large ship looming in the distance. Jon can’t see whose ship it is. He doesn’t care. All he cares about is in his arms and at his feet. Fuck the rest.

With the dawn comes bits and pieces he had lost, memories held at bay last night. They assault him relentlessly now. They rip and tear their way through him, leaving him so full of despair that he can hardly breathe. Dany’s hand around his, guiding it between her legs towards their daughter’s head. The tears tracking down her face as she held their daughter for the first and last time. Her voice, faint, quivering: *I love you.* All the blood— the pain. Her strength despite it all. And at the end…—

*No,* he thinks, the word as sharp as a slap. *I can’t. I won’t. I will never think of that again. I will never live through that memory again.*

As they approach the ship, Arya says, her voice flat: “That’s Kinvara’s boat.”

Jon sees that she’s right. It is: it’s the boat she departed King’s Landing in. He waits to feel something at that. Hope, maybe. After all, he had come back. He had bled out and died, too. He had gone to that dark place, and then he had come back from it. He was only half the person his wife was; if he was worthy of resurrection, she was worthy of immortality.

But he feels no stirrings of hope. His heart does not rise. He does not sigh in relief. He does not feel anything except that dark weight chaining him down. That weight is made up of plenty of things—rage, despair, grief, fear, desperation— but those things are not hope. Hope is for people who believe in some force of goodness, some balance to the universe, and Jon believes in nothing. Nothing beyond the child in his arms and the woman dead at his feet. If he wants this fixed, he will have to rely on something real.

And his rage is real. It is a living, breathing beast clamped down on his heart. It tears at his stomach with its claws. It is real.

And that beast lies on its bed of grief, and it feasts on despair.
How badly would you have to hurt someone for them to die of pain? Jon had once wondered, seeking punishment for Bloodraven. There must be a fine line, too— cause too much pain and hurt them too badly, and they’ll die from that injury. How could you cause immense suffering without ending life immediately?

He looks at his wife’s braid, peeking out from beneath the blanket covering her face.

This is how.

IV.

It seems to take hours to get to the ship.

Arya helps Grey Worm row. Jon tries to use all their cloaks to make a soft, safe place to rest Lyaella so that he can help, too, but the moment he settles her in the nest of fabric, she begins wailing, the sound shrill and horrible. He can’t bear it anymore than he can bear the sight of her mother’s still chest. He scoops her back up. Fuck the rest.

She’s soiled the cloak she’s wrapped in, and Jon remembers he has one of her gowns with him, though he doesn’t remember grabbing it. He must have been the one who did, though: it’s the gown Dany loved the most, a bright blue one made of soft fabric. He can recall with perfect clarity the way she smiled when they received it from Essos, the way her hands— whole then; not destroyed, not chained by crippling injury— stroked the fabric. It’s my favorite, she told Jon, smiling.

And his mind had remembered. Somehow, in the haze of his grief, he had retrieved it from their sinking ship. With her blood still on his hands. With the last sight of her— her face going slack, her breath leaving her in an exhale— still throttling his every thought.

On a maddened loop, as persistent as the sun rising into the sky, he thinks: it has stopped storming, but it is not over. It has stopped storming, but it is not done. It is not done. It is not done.

His hands shake hard now as he cleans their daughter. He lays her on his thighs and dips the edge of the cloak into the sea, using it to gently wipe her skin clean. She’s surprisingly content as he does. Quiet. Her eyes are open. A deep gray, they watch Jon, then close again, then open. Her tiny brow furrows every time she shuts them: he thinks the rising sun must offend her after being in such a quiet, dark place for so long, so he leans further over her to block its brightness. He would strike it from the sky if he had the ability.

When she’s clean, he pulls that soft blue gown onto her, mindful not to let it pull at the remaining part of the cord that had once tied her to her mother. Jon doesn’t know when it was cut and tied off or by whom; he guesses Arya at some point, though how her hands had been steady enough, he’s unsure. They’ve all been trembling since the birth. He doubts they’ll ever stop.

A thought comes to him as he gazes at Lyaella, her hair clean, shining silver, her dress bright and cheery. She’s beautiful. But he had never expected anything different.

She gives a few stuttering cries, clearly unhappy with being away from his heartbeat for so long. He brings her back to his chest, his hand cradling the back of her head. Her silver curls tickle his palm. For a moment, the pressure in his heart is different: he feels love there, shoved up against grief. He thinks Lyaella must be the most powerful person in the entire world to cause that when he’d been certain he’d never feel anything but the weight of that darkness for the rest of his days.

“You’re okay,” he tells his daughter, and the sound of his voice calms her at once. It’s surely the only other familiar sound beyond a heartbeat that she’s heard since Dany spoke last. What were her
last words? Jon feels fear grip him at once. Panic. He can’t remember. What was the last thing she said? How could I forget that? How could I forget?

He can feel the pressure in his chest trying to push up his throat, trying to leave him in tears, but he can’t let it. If he starts crying, he will never stop. Never.

He hides his face against Lyaella’s hair again. His breathing is labored against the sobs that are trying to wrack his frame.

“I’m going to fix this,” he hears himself whisper to Lyaella. Each word shivers with tears. I’m going to get her back to you. To us.

There is no other alternative.

V.

Grey Worm breaks down in tears.

“I can’t,” he says in Valyrian, looking up at Blue Rat and Red Fly. The surviving soldiers and handmaids are already on Kinvara’s ship and waiting to receive the second tender at the loading door. But Grey Worm can’t get himself to pick Daenerys up again from the floor of the boat. Jon’s sure it was pure adrenaline that gave him the strength to do it before. “I can’t.”

“We will,” Red Fly assures Grey Worm, his face hard. He looks at Jon. “You all get out, and we will get the queen.”

But Jon can’t step from that boat with her still in it. He can’t leave her. Even now.

“I’ll wait,” he tells them. The words sound choked, but he cannot cry. He cannot. The sight of Grey Worm’s tears nearly breaks through his own resolve, but he can’t. He has a job to do. He has something to fix. He can’t fall to the floor of this boat and cry against his wife’s hair— though that is all he wants to do. The only thing he thinks would alleviate the suffocation in his chest. He has a job to do. It is not done.

He refuses to let anyone take Lyaella from him. She’s calm and content with him, and he won’t risk upsetting her. If Jon had his way, she would never again feel a moment of discomfort or uneasiness a day in her life. Not ever again.

“I won’t drop her,” he tells Blue Rat and Arya. For a painful second, he’s back in the chambers on their boat, his hands tight around Dany’s arms as she pushes. I’m not going to let her fall. He hadn’t. He’d held her up until she pulled their daughter from her body. But she had died anyway.

When Blue Rat and Red Fly step into the tender and hoist Daenerys’s body up, her arm hangs limp at her side. Jon sees bruises on her forearms, just below her elbows. Where he’d gripped her and held her up. His eyes close against a sudden wave of vertigo. For a second, he thinks he’s going to be sick. He has to breathe through it until he can rise, shakily and carefully, and carry Lyaella onto the ship.

They’re met in the lower corridor. Kinvara is not alone. She’s with a Red Priestess Jon has never seen before; she’s young, and her face is drawn with sadness. In her arms, she holds a baby only a little older than Lyaella.

“This is Tirina,” Kinvara greets them, looking at the other priestess. “She will nurse the princess while we talk. The baby must be hungry.”
Jon’s body is quicker than his mind. At once, all he can hear is his heartbeat pounding in his head. His rage devours every thought, leaving a strange blankness in his mind, a period in time where everything appears to move slower than normal. Where everything else but his rage is distant.

Tirina says something, her eyes on Lyælla’s hair peeking out from above Jon’s cloak. She reaches towards her. Jon’s stomach is forcibly yanked to his feet. He takes a long step back from her, sick surging up his throat. He makes no decisions: his body makes them for him. He turns, passing Lyælla to Grey Worm. He steps back up to Kinvara and Tirina. And then, with every sound but his own pulse muffled and dull, he reaches towards Arya’s hip. She’s already reaching toward her other side. In what must amount to only a second or two, both Needle and Longclaw are at Kinvara’s throat. She hardly flinches.

“You knew!” Arya yells, her voice furious, shaking— feral. “You knew! You knew she was going to die! You fucking knew she wasn’t going to survive! You let us go anyway! YOU KNEW!”

Needle pokes at Kinvara’s neck, drawing a bead of blood, and Jon doesn’t say a word to stop his sister. He only brings Longclaw in closer, too.

“I knew no specifics then. But the Lord of Light instructed me to bring Tirina, for the babe, and Tirina was honored to do the Lord of Light’s bidding.” She sounds so calm for someone with two blades at her throat. Does she know how close Jon is to pushing Longclaw through her esophagus? His muscles are taunt. It’s only his duty keeping him from killing her now. Killing her is what he wants to do. He has never felt worse. Never felt angrier. Never wanted to see someone choke to death on their own blood more. But she has more value to him alive: that’s the only rational thought he has in his head right now.

“You knew something horrible was going to happen, and you let her go anyway!” It’s his own voice. The words come from him, but they fly from his lips with no prior thought. His mind is whirling, each thought so tangled with the pressure in his chest that he can hardly separate the two. I am my grief, he thinks, and he lets it consume him.

“You are responsible! You did this! And now, you are going to bring her back!” He steps closer. Her eyes dart nervously down to Longclaw this time. “Bring her back!”

She meets his eyes. Jon looks away, disgusted, certain he’s going to be sick. He doesn’t even want to look at her.

“There are no guarantees with resurrection, no way to ensure success. If the Lord of Light wants someone back, the Lord of Light brings them back. What happened to you was not the norm—”

“BE QUIET!” That’s him, too. “You will bring her back! You will bring her back to me— or the Lord of Light will take me, too!”

That thought, entwined so solidly with his grief that it cannot be extracted from it, is something he’s certain of. He won’t live here without Daenerys. He won’t. He won’t go home to their kingdom, to their bed, and sleep there without her. He won’t wake every day to the sight of her pillow empty. He won’t go through the rest of his days without talking to her, without kissing her. He won’t. From this day, until the end of my days. How could that be true if she wasn’t there to share all the days leading to the end of his days? It couldn’t be. It couldn’t. He had made a vow. He intended to stand by it. He would run himself through with Longclaw and bleed out before he carried on like this, suffocating every second of every day under despair so heavy it was nothing short of torture. The cruelty of life without her would be too brutal a punishment for even the worst of his crimes. He doesn’t deserve that. He doesn’t.
Perhaps Kinvara sees his sincerity. She looks frightened for the first time.

“You mustn’t say things like that,” she tells him. “You mustn’t leave the princess alone in this world without family the way you were left— the way Queen Daenerys was left. Daenerys wouldn’t want that. She died for that child, for you. You would dishonor her.”

What does she know of honor? What does she know of him? There is no honor to be had in any of this. He had failed his wife. He had killed his wife. There would be no dishonor greater than that.

But he sees truth in her words, too. He thinks of Lyella’s little heart thrumming over his. He can’t abandon her here without him. A Targaryen alone in the world is a terrible thing, Maester Aemon had said, and he was right. He and Dany had felt that for years before they finally found each other. How could he doom his daughter to that fate?

Jon’s threat of suicide affects Kinvara more than the blade at her throat does. He’s still important to the Lord of Light, he gathers. Yet if that were true, if he was, how could the Lord of Light destroy him like this?

Jon lowers Longclaw and leans into this new weapon.

“Then bring her back. Bring her back to me,” he orders. “If you don’t want me to follow her, bring her back here.”

Her face falls in sadness. “As I said before, I cannot promise—”

He steps closer to Kinvara. Arya lowers Needle, giving him room to stand directly in front of her and look down at her, so that she may see the sincerity in his gaze as he speaks.

She’d been right before: he can’t leave Lyella alone in this world. But that doesn’t mean he’s helpless. His mind is quick now, weaving through possible actions, searching for a solution, a way to get Dany back with him. No solution is too terrible if it means he’ll see her smile again. *I see the way*, he thinks, and what he sees is fire.

“You will do it. You will bring her back! Or I will lay waste to every temple in Essos and Westeros alike— every fucking one! Bring her back, or I will demolish everything the Lord of Light has built until nothing remains of him and his faith but ash!”

*It’s his fault. It’s his fault. It’s your fault.*

*It’s my fault.*

His grief nearly brings him to his knees again, but he can’t let it. He’s not done yet.

She appears anguished. He briefly wonders how she envisioned this confrontation happening. Did she truly believe he would forgive her for sending his wife off to her death? If she thought that, her god saw no truth. Her god was powerless and empty. He’d be easy to destroy. Jon would swing the sword himself.

“Aegon,” she says, voice trembling with desperation. She’s desperate for him to understand, but Jon understands everything. He understands that she is going to bring Daenerys back, or R’hollr will die. It is that simple. “It’s not up to me to bring anybody back. I can try— and I intend to try, that’s why I’m here— but if our lord is finished with her—”

His heart spasms painfully. For a moment, he wants to strike her.
“He is NOT MY GOD! He is not mine!” Jon thunders.

His gods are old and true. His gods live in things you can see, like the new growth at spring, like that first swell of Daenerys’s stomach. His gods live in the softness of her kiss, in the roses her soap comes from, in the miraculous feeling of his daughter’s head beneath his fingers, his wife’s body working through some horrible, beautiful thing made of power Jon has never seen before, never imagined before. The greatest power he has ever witnessed— would ever witness. Power that, even now, brings tears to the backs of his eyes and a shudder to his spine. That is where his gods live.

Not here. Not on this ship, Daenerys’s still, empty body on the floor a few paces behind them. Not with Lyaella crying in Grey Worm’s arms, about to have to nurse from a woman who is not her mother, from a woman who did not grow her within her womb, a woman who did not craft her with every bit of love and power and strength and goodness she had in her. Dany had brought their daughter into the world with every bit of care she’d carried her with. And Lyaella would never remember her face. Would never remember her love. Would never know her. She would grow up without a mother’s love as Jon had, as Dany had. And it was Kinvara’s fault— the Lord of Light’s fault— Bloodraven’s fault— Longclaw’s fault—

*Jon’s fault.*

“The Lord of Light is not my god,” Jon repeats, but this time, the words are quiet, severe. A warning. “No just god would do something like this. No benevolent presence would have someone die suffering after a life of rescuing, a life of protecting others. I will not follow a beast like that.”

A beast. Like his grief, writhing in his chest, eating through his insides. There is no evil beyond that.

Kinvara’s face is cloaked with a look of soft surprise. “You believe she suffered? No, I don’t believe she did. I don’t think that at all. I think she was happy. I think she was proud. Do you realize what she accomplished? If you did, you would be proud of her, too. She brought the princess safely into this world despite all the odds stacked against her— and there were many. She destroyed all the Great Other had left. His last servant. I am sure she died proud.”

Jon is no idiot and he doesn’t want her condescending words of comfort. He knows exactly what happened in his wife’s last moments. He had made it to her bedside— had seen Bloodraven there behind her eyes— had seen her fight through for just one moment…had seen her desperation, her question. Her. Asking him to give her what she needs one last time. Asking him to support her one last time. To hold her up again, this time as she *takes* someone from the world. He was her other half, her blood: if she was too weak, he would give her all the strength he had.

And he had.

He bends over now, the memory twisting his intestines into knots so tight it’s genuine pain. He feels his stomach convulse, and he heaves, but nothing comes up. He has nothing left.

He knows what she accomplished. But it’s not enough. It’s not enough. Because he also knows the cost.

He presses on, his voice rising in volume despite how sick he feels.

“I don’t give a damn what you think her last moments were like! You weren’t there! You didn’t see what she went through! And they were her *last.* The last she will ever have!”

He straightens, but the pain inside him wants to drag him to the floor. To where Daenerys is. He can’t see anything but the blood surrounding her on that bed. He can’t smell anything but the metallic
sting of it in his nose. He can’t feel anything but the terror he had felt, the desperation. The rage. *I love you,* he hears again. Were those her last words? He didn’t deserve them. What had his love ever bought her but pain?

The beast in his chest consumes him. There is nothing he can do. He bends over again, but this time, it’s as sobs surge up his throat. His breaths are gasping, weak. He can hardly stay upright.

“I don’t care,” he says again, the words packed between sobs. “She’s not here. She’s not here! I want her back! I want her back here!”

He feels Arya grasp his bicep, steadying him. If she didn’t, he thinks he’d fall to the floor.

“And it’s natural to feel that way,” Kinvara says gently.

“DO NOT TOUCH HIM!” Arya roars suddenly. Jon guesses Kinvara has reached out to him, to comfort him. Arya makes the right call. He is certain, had he felt Kinvara’s touch, he would have gone mad with rage. Genuinely mad. A madness to rival Daenerys’s father, his grandfather.

There’s a pause. Nothing happens beyond Jon gasping and Lyaella sobbing. Will that be the rest of their lives?

“As I’ve said before, the Lord of Light is not your enemy. You should tread lightly making the threats you’re making now. You need the Lord now more than ever.”

No. He needs his gods now more than ever. And for a moment, he feels them with him. He finds the strength to stand and face her again, the strength to wipe at the tears blinding him. The strength to speak. The strength to stitch his grief closed again, the strength to swallow it back down into his heavy chest.

“Anyone who takes Daenerys away from me is my enemy,” he tells Kinvara. His words tremble as Dany’s body had as she lay there bleeding out. That thought only twists his grief further into rage. “I’m sure you’ll tell me next that this was the Lord’s will, but I don’t care about his fucking reasons. I don’t give a damn what the bigger picture is. All I know is that I boarded that ship with my wife, and now, she is lying here dead. And someone will be held accountable for that. Someone will be punished. If not your Lord of Light, who? If not him, who should I blame? Myself? I already do. If it weren’t for Lyaella, I would have run myself though with Longclaw and bled out, too. You? If it weren’t for the fact that I need you to bring her back, I would have taken your head from your shoulders the moment I saw you.”

It’s quiet except for Lyaella’s sobs. Jon feels a strange calmness washing over him. He clings to it. *I am not helpless now,* he thinks, his rage burning so fiercely it turns everything else to soft, quiet ash. To nothing. *I am not.*

“Your Lord of Light has a choice. He can fix what he did— he can make this right and return Daenerys to me— or I swear, by the old gods and the new, that I will destroy his faith and I will destroy him. I will blaze the Red Temple of Volantis until not even a stone remains. I will execute every priestess I find. I will burn every book about R’hollr. I will outlaw his name and I will cut the tongue from any mouth that dares to speak it. If he wants to cause darkness, I’ll push him into it. And if he kills me for it, well, that only brings me closer to being face-to-face with him.”

What would he do then? Jon is brimming with power that stems from having nothing to lose. The Lord of Light won’t harm Lyaella— he clearly intends on using her as he used Daenerys. What could he possibly do to Jon now? Jon has the power. Jon has rage. And he will do with that power and rage what he must. No matter how terrible.
Kinvara is frightened. It’s clear in the way she steps back from Jon.

“You’re speaking in grief,” she tells him, her words uneasy. “You’re not thinking clearly. You’re not yourself.”

He’s never heard words less true.

“No. All I am is myself.” *Fuck the rest.* He stands straighter, his heart pounding again, but it’s not with fear this time. “I am the king of the Seven Kingdoms, and you will bring the queen back to me. You will bring the princess’s mother back to her. Or war as you have never seen it will follow. I will *never* stop. It will go on until I see her again. I will burn this world to ash for *decades* if I have to.”

He sees, in the silence that follows, that Kinvara doesn’t believe him. She looks upon him with sadness, but her fear has drained away.

“You don’t believe me. You don’t think I mean what I’m saying,” he realizes. He feels the urge to laugh, but his grief is too heavy to allow it. “You don’t believe it.”

She shakes her head slowly, apologetically. “No, I do not. I don’t think you have the darkness in your soul required for it. Inside you, you’re made of light.”

*I am,* Jon thinks, his thoughts weaving unsteady, *but that light is fire.*

“I have no darkness in my soul, that’s true. But I have fire.” He refuses to let Kinvara look away from his gaze. Let her peer into his soul—let her see the truth of what he says. “I am Aegon the Conqueror’s descendent. His blood runs through me. And my actions will speak for my heart. Will speak for this light you say is inside of me. I do not make false promises. Let us see who is right.”

He turns away from Kinvara and looks at his and Daenerys’s soldiers. He takes Lyaella back into his arms. He hardly feels the softness of her hair against his lips as he kisses the crown of her head gently.

“Go take over navigation,” he tells one soldier. “Get us to Dragonstone posthaste.”

He looks at Red Fly and Blue Rat. For once, his pain doesn’t touch him. “Bring the queen with me. We’ll find some place soft to lay her until Kinvara brings her back.”

He faces Grey Worm next. The Valyrian words come without any effort at all.

“When we make land, find those dragon eggs. Tear Dragonstone apart if you must. Find them. Every single one. And then bring them to me,” he orders.

Grey Worm nods, his eyes hard. He looks ready for battle. Good.

“You Grace,” Tirina says, right as Jon starts to storm past her. “The baby must eat. I am sorry. But the baby must.”

He will not witness it. He will not watch Lyaella nurse from another woman’s breast. He will not. Just the thought makes anger flood his body again. Sadness follows quickly after.

“I'll go with them,” Arya says. She reaches for Lyaella, and Jon is surprised by how easily he can pass his daughter to her. If ever there were another pair of arms as safe as his, it’s Arya’s. “I’ll bring her back to you afterwards. She *will* be safe.”

Arya’s eyes are as stony as Jon’s.
Jon ignores Kinvara. He settles Daenerys gently on the table, careful not to touch her injured hands or jar her body. He doesn’t want her to be in even more pain when she wakes. He remembers how much he had been in when he came back, how the deep gouges in his stomach and chest had ached with a hot pain that took ages to finally cool. He doesn’t want that pain for her.

“Don’t touch her,” he tells Kinvara. She’s approaching with a bowl of warm water. “I will do it. Tell me what to do.”

This is my duty. I am the reason she’s on this table. It’s my duty.

Kinvara must see how he shakes.

“No, you don’t have to do that,” she protests gently. “Why put yourself through more grief? You’ve done enough. You’ve helped her enough. You can remain in here if you wish, but if it’s easier for you to go, go. I will send for you if something changes.”

He shakes his head at once. It does not matter how upset he is. It does not matter how weak his legs are, how strong his nausea is. He will be the first thing she sees when she comes back. She’ll know that he never left her. He never abandoned her. He never betrayed her. He will not let her wake up to confusion, to loneliness. To fear. Not as he did.

“I will stay and I will help. What do I do? What’s first?”

She looks at him curiously. “You don’t remember any of it? None of it?”

“I was dead. All I remember is darkness,” he says, taking the bowl of water from her. “We’re cleaning her?”

She stares at him for a beat. He sees tears prick her eyes, but he doesn’t care what she feels. Her sorrow doesn’t come close to his own misery.

“Yes,” she finally says. She clears her throat softly and walks over to the table Dany is on. “Start with her body. Wash the blood from her, and don’t stop. I’ll be speaking and I won’t be able to stop what I’m saying to give you instructions. I’m going to be cutting her hair, touching her chest, and touching her: you must be okay with that, and you must not stop me. It’s part of it. I will not harm her in any way. Do you understand?”

He does, but it’s not easy. He can’t stand anyone getting close to her body, much less touching it. But he nods, his jaw clenched.

“Good. After you wash her skin, wash her hair, but wait until I’ve cut a few pieces. I need her blood still on it when I use it. Aegon…I have to warn you. I don’t know if this will work. Bloodraven was tied to her consciousness; if she comes back, he could, too. And I don’t believe the Lord of Light will allow that.”

He does, but it’s not easy. He can’t stand anyone getting close to her body, much less touching it. But he nods, his jaw clenched.

“Good. After you wash her skin, wash her hair, but wait until I’ve cut a few pieces. I need her blood still on it when I use it. Aegon…I have to warn you. I don’t know if this will work. Bloodraven was tied to her consciousness; if she comes back, he could, too. And I don’t believe the Lord of Light will allow that.”

Jon’s voice is dark and steady. “He will allow it. He will return her to me— her, Dany. I don’t care what he does with Lord Bloodraven. Let him torture him for the rest of time itself. But Dany comes back.” He looks at the rag she passes him. “This is rough as sand. Give me something better for her.”

She is the queen. Even now— she is our queen.
With a suitably gentle cloth in hand, he begins at her feet. Blood flowed so far down her legs after the birth that she’s got blood caked between her toes; after cleaning only part of one of her feet, the water in the bowl is already copper.

“This won’t do,” Jon tells Kinvara, stopping her before she begins. He feels sick. “I’m going to need more water.”

She comes to stand by him. She peers into the rusty water.

“Yes,” she agrees quietly. “I’ll fetch us more.”

Jon’s heart might as well be in the back of his throat. He feels the pain that far, the aching. Or perhaps it’s just from his withheld tears.

“She likes lavender oil in her bath,” he adds. He’s trying not to cry. He doesn’t know if he can keep from it. I don’t know if I can do it, I don’t know if I can do it, I don’t know if I can. The thought winds around his head in a never-ending loop. But he doesn’t leave.

“Okay,” Kinvara says, her voice gentle. “I’ll fetch that, too, then.” She pauses. He senses her reaching out to him, but she must think twice about it, because he never feels her touch. “It’s okay, Aegon— Jon. It’s okay.”

He wishes people would stop saying that. It is clearly not okay. It has never been less okay than it is now. Not ever. He’d rather be the one on the table again—that would make things better. That would make things okay. This is unbearable.

When he’s brought more water, he continues on. How does the Lord of Light get our blood back into us when he brings us back? he wonders. He had been very weak upon waking after his own death—maybe the Lord of Light can’t. Maybe he just gives them the ability to live until what little blood remains can replenish itself.

But does Dany have any blood left at all? If she does, Jon can’t imagine how. He has to give up on rinsing the rag by the time he makes it to her thighs, as he’s turned five bowls of water blood-red already. He starts pouring the water over her then, rinsing what can be rinsed away and then gently wiping what’s dried. His hands tremble so hard he spills half the water on the floor rather than on Dany, and by the time he’s made it to her chest, he and Kinvara are standing in a puddle of bloodied water.

If he focuses hard enough, he can understand some of what Kinvara is saying in High Valyrian. But for the most part, it’s background noise. He gently rinses the blood from the three shallow puncture wounds near where the dagger had been buried. Her hands, weak and ruined, had tried so hard to push the blade in, but she couldn’t manage it alone. They had managed it together. And now, as Jon gently wipes the gash where the dagger had been buried, he finds himself wishing he’d been able to help her sooner. If he had been able to get off that floor—had been able to choke back the vomit the pain in his head caused—he could have gotten to her sooner. He could have looked into her eyes and understood. He could have saved her from these three other unnecessary wounds, from the panic that had flooded her eyes as she realized she couldn’t do it alone.

And maybe he should have let Arya do it. Arya would have passed him Lyaella and done it quickly, Jon knows—quicker than he had managed due to how weak and disoriented he was from what Bloodraven had done to him. Arya had turned to do just that as he stepped past her. But at the time, he remembers thinking: she is my blood. She is mine, and I am hers. I will be the last person to protect her. I will be the last touch she feels, the last person to protect her. I will be the one looking into her eyes as she dies.
The only thing that keeps him from breaking apart at the memory of that dagger sinking into her heart is the memory of the relief he saw on her face. It had been true relief. And the way she’d exhaled as she died had seemed almost peaceful— at least in comparison to all the suffering that had come before it.

He’s able to stop dwelling on that memory once he moves past the wounds on her chest. He focuses on his job at hand, but that job only gets harder as he moves onto her hands. Looking at them upsets him as much as it makes him sick. All the other damage to her body is minimal in comparison. Her hands must be put back together again, and Jon doesn’t have the ability to do that the way it needs to be done. All he can do is clean the blood from them. He uses the soft cloth to wipe the blood from between her fingers. He pulls Queen Rhaella’s ring off her finger and cleans beneath it, returning it quickly to its spot afterwards. As he pours water over the palm of her right hand, loosening the dried blood matted around the few remaining stitches, he catches sight of something stuck to her wound. Something that had been in her fist.

The warm water he’s pouring over her hand loosens it. And when his hair tie falls into the copper water puddled at his feet, he feels his knees buckle. He kneels in the pool, his head light on his shoulders, sick in his heart and in his gut. A memory comes rushing back to him: her blood-drenched hands stroking his beard, combing his hair, pulling his bun down as she tells him it’s time for him to leave (time to leave her).

She held that tie in her hand the entire time. She died with it. His fingers shake as he retrieves it from the water. He doesn’t think he can finish this. He doesn’t think he can look at her face, still in death. Empty. He hears her voice reverberate at the back of his mind: “And if you looked into my eyes and I wasn’t me anymore, what would you do?”

I’d get you back.

He doubles over, digging his nails so hard into his scalp that he knows he must be drawing blood. He can’t rise. He can’t stand. He can’t continue.

But he does anyway. I don’t make false promises, he’d told Kinvara. And that was true. He would get her back or he would die trying.

Kinvara continues praying as he finishes cleaning Daenerys’s wrists and arms. By the time he makes it to her face, she’s unwinding Dany’s braid. He keeps his eyes on Dany’s face as Kinvara cuts pieces of her hair. He wipes her cheeks, her temples, her lips. Her eyelids, her forehead. He touches her cheekbone with his quivering fingertips, imagining that her eyelids might open, that he’ll find her looking back at him.

I will never see her eyes again, he thinks, and at that thought, he has to lean into the table for support.

Kinvara throws the cut pieces of hair into the fire roaring in the hearth. Jon wonders if they will even burn. He moves to her hair next, first pouring water over it, trying to rinse most of the blood out. He catches himself gently setting his hand just above her eyebrows as he does so that water doesn’t get into her eyes. After he’s rinsed her hair until it’s copper-tinged silver, he grabs the provided bar of soap and suds his hands up. He takes his time washing her scalp and her hair, working every bit of blood from behind her ears and the nape of her neck. When he finally rinses all the soap free, her hair is pure, shining silver.

He has never braided hair before, but he’s watched Dany do it so many times that he can close his eyes now and picture her delicate fingers weaving pieces of her silver hair with perfect clarity. He closes his eyes and sits in the blood-tinged puddle on the floor, his fingers finding Dany’s long, damp hair. He pictures her hands, following the memory of her movements with his own. He feels as if someone is guiding him as his fingers pull three sections over and under each other. He tells himself
it’s her. And when he reaches the end of her hair, he takes his blood-stained hair tie and ties off the braid, and he opens his eyes. It’s far from perfect, but it’s a braid. It’s the best he can do. He hopes it’s enough.

When she’s clean, Kinvara sets her hands over Dany’s still heart and closes her eyes. Jon rises and stands on the other side of the table. He can feel every word bolting though him as she prays, her tone becoming more desperate with each word she utters. He closes his eyes, too, that pressure in his heart filling his entire frame. Please, he thinks. Please. Oh, please.

He doesn’t know how long they stand there watching Daenerys Targaryen’s beautiful face. Jon takes her cold hands in his gently and holds them the entire time, his eyes chained to her eyelids, waiting for the moment they’ll flutter open. Waiting. Waiting.

But she is still. She doesn’t breathe. She doesn’t move. He does not see the violet of her eyes.

“I’m sorry,” Kinvara whispers. He hears tears in her voice again. He doesn’t accept her apology.

“It just takes more time. We’ve just got to wait,” he says. “Just a bit longer.”

She’s quiet for a time. Then, she asks: “How long will you wait?”

It’s a stupid question. “Until she sits up and walks from this room with me.”

He means it. He perches on the edge of that table and holds her hands long past the time Kinvara finally leaves. Any minute now, she’ll be back to him. Any minute now, they’ll be together again. It’s just a matter of time.

VII.

“Jon?”

He doesn’t turn towards Arya’s voice. He’s braiding Dany’s hair again, his fingers quivering. He’s determined to get it right. Determined to get it perfect. Determined to have something to show her when she wakes up, something to make her proud.

Arya’s footsteps are hesitant. He feels her hand settle over his shoulder blade.

“It’s late. Why don’t you come back in here in the morning? Her hair looks fine.”

“It’s not,” he insists. His quivering fingers slip in Daenerys’s hair, and half of the braid undos. He feels his eyes burn fiercely. “It’s not fine. It’s not right.”

“It is. Take Lyaella. Holding her will make you feel better.”

Nothing will make him feel better. Nothing except Dany sitting up again, talking to him again. Nothing. He doesn’t respond.

“It’s late,” Arya says again, firmer this time. “Put Lyaella to bed. They’ve put a cradle in your chambers. I’ll walk you there. Come on, Jon. You can’t fall apart. Not now.”

He’s not falling apart. He’s trying to braid Dany’s hair. He’s trying to get it the way she wears it. He’s trying to do right by her. Why can’t Arya see that?

His eyes are burning as he finishes braiding her hair. He ties it off, fingers so unsteady they slip quite a number of times. The ache in his stomach is severe now. He can’t even bear the thought of drinking water, much less eating anything, no matter how many soldiers brought him food and begged him to. He doesn’t want water and he doesn’t want food. He doesn’t want sleep. He wants Dany.

When he hears Lyella make a soft sound from Arya’s arms, he turns around to look at her. And what he sees makes his stomach drop, his heart plummet. His fists ball at his sides. Tears crawl up his throat.

“What happened to her gown?!?” Jon demands. He hears the tears rising, but he can do little to stop it. Lyella is wearing another baby’s gown. It’s yellow. “Where is her gown?!”

Arya’s taken aback. “The blue one? It’s soiled...we had a bit of trouble getting her to nurse, that’s why it took so long. It’s with the handmaids, they’re going to…”

She stops. Jon turns his face to the side. He can feel the tears rolling down his cheeks.

“I…I can go get it back? Jon…”

His heart cracks in two. And he cries. The first few are wheezing, quiet. But with each sob he heaves, it grows in intensity, until he’s gripping the edge of the table Dany’s on and weeping over her body, his head bowed. He feels the force of each sob in his stomach, his lower back. Every muscle aches.

“That was— it was Dany’s favorite— I wanted Lyella to wear it when she comes back— I want you to get it back— I want—I want—” he can’t finish. He can’t space his sobs out enough to get any coherent words out. He only cries harder. I want Dany. I want Dany. I want Dany.

He sinks to the floor. He can’t catch his breath, he can’t stop. He can’t stop seeing horrible things behind his eyes. Her still body, the blood soaking the mattress beneath her, her eyes as they shut for the last time. His hand around hers and hers around the dagger. Longclaw buried inside her grip.

“I killed her. Arya, I killed her!” He’s lightheaded. He can’t breathe. “I killed her!”

His sister joins him on the floor. She’s crying, too. And soon, Lyella is crying with them.

“You didn’t,” Arya insists, choked. “Bloodraven did. You didn’t.”

It bursts from him. “I did! I fucking did! It was my sword she cut her hands on! I left it in the room! I didn’t watch over her! I didn’t protect her! And I was the one who got her pregnant— it’s my fault she bled out! And I’m the one…I’m the one— I — I — I—”

He turns his face to the side. For a second, he thinks he’s going to be sick. But nothing comes up but more ragged gasps and sobs.

“And I’m the one who fell asleep, Jon! I’m the one who taught her how to use that fucking dagger! I’m the one who gave it to her! And I’m the one who put it in her hand! I would have done exactly what you did! You didn’t do anything wrong—”

He pulls his hair and leans so far over his head is nearly between his knees. “I did! I did! I killed her! It’s my fault!”

“It’s what she wanted! It’s what she needed! You gave her everything she needed, Jon, up until the last moment— that has to count for something—”
“It counts for nothing! Nothing! Because she’s gone! Arya, I can’t—I can’t—”

She grabs his shoulders and turns him to face her. When she pulls him into a one-armed embrace, he feels like the younger sibling. She holds him gently, mindful of Lyaella clutched to her with her other arm, and when Jon reaches to hold her back, she breaks down into sobs as violent as his.

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry,” she weeps.

He is, too. He thinks the pain of it will kill him. He wants it to.

He doesn’t know how long they sit on the floor and cry. Dany never wakes. Finally, when he has no energy left to cry anymore, he speaks a horrible truth that’s been corroding his heart for hours.

“Bloodraven is dead, but he won. Everything he said would happen happened. She bled out during childbirth. I killed her. He was right. He won.”

“No. He didn’t. Lyaella survived,” Arya reminds him. “Against all the odds— she’s here. And we’re going to get Daenerys back.”

He’s so afraid that he’ll fail. He’s so afraid that this is a promise he won’t be able to stand by, that he won’t be able to pull Dany from that darkness, won’t be able to bring her back to herself, to him. To Lyaella.

He refuses to leave the room. Refuses to leave Dany. He has to be here when she comes back. He has to.

Red Fly brings an armchair into the room, and Jon settles into it with Lyaella after changing into dry clothes. He doesn’t want the cradle brought to him. He has no intention of setting Lyaella down and no intention of truly sleeping. He rests his head against the chair and gazes down at his daughter as she sleeps cradled in his arms, her little ear leaning over his heart. They sit in near-darkness: Lyaella likes the softness of it best.

“I’m going to bring her back,” he promises Lyaella again. But he is afraid.

Please wake. Please. Please. Please.

It’s all he thinks all night long.

She never wakes.

VIII.

He feels nothing when they arrive at Dragonstone.

“Your Grace,” a soldier asks gently. He hovers in the doorway. “What should we do with the queen?”

Jon doesn’t tear his dry eyes from his wife. Except for the dress he and Arya put back on her, she’s exactly as she was when he cleaned her yesterday.

“She goes with me,” Jon says. His voice is an empty pit. “Kinvara is going to try again.”

The soldier is quiet for a long beat. Jon wonders if he thinks he’s gone mad. Maybe he has.

“Yes, Your Grace,” he finally says. “We’ll carry her and follow you.”
Jon feels nothing. He cradles Lyaella as they step onto Dragonstone’s shores, and he feels nothing. They walk towards their castle, and he feels nothing. They step into the entrance hall, and he feels nothing. They settle Dany in her chambers, on her bed, and he feels nothing.

“Try again,” he tells Kinvara. “We have to try again.”

Her eyes are puffy. It appears as if she hasn’t slept, either.

“I will try again. But it won’t work,” she tells him. “The Lord of Light does not will it.”

“The Lord of Light doesn’t get to choose. I do. And I say try again.”

She does. Jon waits in another room this time, afraid the magic won’t work with him in the room somehow. Maybe the Lord of Light knows he doesn’t believe in him. Maybe Jon somehow taints Kinvara’s powers.

He waits. And waits. And waits.

Lyaella sleeps in his arms.

Finally, Kinvara steps out. Jon takes one look at her face and sags. He feels as if the breath has been twisted from his lungs.

“Again,” he says, his voice shaking. “Try again!”

“Jon,” she says softly. It gets his attention. She usually calls him Aegon. “How long will this go on? Shall we let her rot in that bed? Do you believe that’s what she would want?”

He can’t hear it— won’t hear it. His heart quakes in his chest. That pressure is climbing up his throat again.


“And when do we stop?” she asks. “When?”

“When she’s alive again! When she returns to me!”

“Jon…”

Something inside him pulls. Snags. He feels white-hot rage. “Aegon. So that you remember what I am made from and what I will do.”

She shakes her head. “Some things cannot be returned to us. No matter how hard we fight for them. No matter how hard we try. Sometimes, love is loss.”

“No,” Jon says, shaking his head. He rises, and as he stands there and stares at Kinvara, he tightens his hold on Lyaella protectively. “No. Love is not loss. Love is growth.”

Love was the rebuilding of Flea Bottom. Love was the construction of sickhouses, of scholarhouses, of gardens. Love was Dany forgiving Sansa. Love was his wedding night. Love was the swell of Dany’s stomach. Love was Lyaella twisting in her womb. Love was Dany sweat-drenched and fierce, bringing their child into this world with every ounce of life she had left, all while knowing she herself would leave it. Love was Lyaella on Dany’s chest. Love was Dany using the last bit of strength she had left to protect her family forever. Love was not loss. Love was Dany.

“We stop when Queen Daenerys is beside me. Not a moment before. If you can’t bring her back,
find me somebody who can.”

IX.

He brings Lyaella to Arya so Arya can bring her to the wet nurse. He will not sit in the room with them.

After Lyaella leaves his arms, he feels white-hot rage flare in his veins. She was the only thing to temper his grief. The only thing in the entire world that could, for a moment, make the pressure in his chest ease up enough for him to breathe and think. Without her, he is grief, and little else.

He walks as if he can outrun his sorrow. He winds through House Targaryen’s ancestral home, eventually finding himself in Aegon’s Garden. The piney scent of the air calms him for a moment; he stands amongst the tall, dark trees, looking up at the shadowy canopy. He imagines his gods are here. Help me, he pleads. Help me.

The wind rustles through the leaves, the bushes, the hedges. On the edge of that breeze, he smells roses. His heart jerks in his chest. The pressure builds. And when it explodes from him this time, it’s in the form of screaming.

He doesn’t remember withdrawing Longclaw, but it’s in his hands. He swings it forward, striking the tree closest to him once, twice, thrice. He strikes it so hard chunks of wood spin out into the air, so hard his shoulder pops and pain shoots to his elbow. But he can’t stop. He strikes harder, and harder, and harder, screaming as he does, all that pressure within him finally cresting. Sweat drenches his shirt; the tree has a gash that reminds him of Dany’s right palm. He swings harder. Where are you? he thinks, the words forceful. Furious. He swings so hard he nearly loses balance. Where were you? Why didn’t you save her? Why didn’t you help me? I looked in that fire for hours. Where were you? Where are you?

Striking the tree is not enough to satiate his rage. He’s destroying the tree, but Longclaw looks fine, and isn’t Longclaw the weapon that started this? He drags Longclaw and crosses over to the nearest castle wall with quick, long strides, hefting his sword back up and swinging again. This time, the blade makes contact with the stones, and Jon feels the impact all the way in his knees. It feels good. He’s quiet as he strikes the wall, all his focus on demolishing that blade. He can’t bring Dany back, but he can do this. He can’t make the Lord of Light face him, but he can do this. He hits with every bit of strength he has left, over and over. He strikes until he can feel sweat dripping down his back, down the center of his chest, down his face. Until his hair is drenched with it— until his arms are shaking. Until he feels wind beating against his face.

He turns his face up towards the sky. When he sees Drogon’s dark, massive form, Longclaw falls down into the dirt. He steps back, waiting. Drogon circles, and as he draws nearer, Jon can hear the low groaning he’s making at the back of his throat. It speaks to Jon’s own heart: if his own grief could be compressed into one sound, it would be that one.

Drogon slams down into a clearing a few steps from Jon. Jon leaves Longclaw on the ground and crosses over to the dragon at once, his heart rising in his chest. When he reaches him, they stand together in the cool night, eye-to-eye. Drogon whimpers. Inside his fiery pupils, Jon sees his despair. Drogon knows that his mother is gone. He’s probably known since it happened.

Jon stumbles forward, his eyes burning. He leans in. As his cheek presses to Drogon’s scales, his eyes drift shut, and he clenches his sore hands at his sides. I’m sorry, he wants to say. She was your mother. I’m sorry.

Drogon groans again. It rumbles through Jon, echoing through his bones. He feels Drogon’s breath
against his hair.

“‘It’s not your fault,’” Jon tells Drogon. The dragon groans again, this one closer to a whimper. “You tried to protect her. I know you did. You did the best you could.” He feels his lips twitch down; he wants to cry. “We all did.”

Drogon nudges Jon’s shoulder gently, and for a moment, Jon thinks he’s comforting him. But then he backs up a bit and nudges Jon’s hip incessantly. Jon understands.

“To where?” he asks Drogon. But what does it matter?

He climbs atop Drogon, gripping him where Dany always did. He’s only just sat when Drogon shoots into the sky.

He doesn’t bother looking around. The only thing in the world he wants to see is the violet of Dany’s eyes: everything else is background noise. He holds on with his eyes closed, sucking in the fresh salty air. For a moment, it feels as if the weight lifts off his lungs. As if his lungs have opened up. For a moment, he can breathe.

He doesn’t want to get down when they land. He doesn’t even want to look around himself. But Drogon shakes him off, dumping him onto the ground into something soft. Ash, Jon thinks, coughing at once as he inhales a mouthful of it. He presses his palms into the soft pillows of ash and pushes himself upright. It takes his eyes a moment to adjust to the moonlight—it’s dimmer here than it’d been in Aegon’s Garden—but finally, he can make out where he’s sitting. He’s tucked inside what appears to be a cavern, sitting in a circle made up of mounds of ash, tufts of soft grass, and bones.

No, Jon thinks suddenly, his eyes adjusting further to the dim light. Not a circle. A nest.

Drogon is right behind him, his scales pressed to Jon. There’s not enough room here in this nest for either of them to go very far. Jon looks up at him.

“Drogon, is this where your eggs are?” he asks him. His face feels tight and cold; when he touches his cheeks, he realizes they’re drenched in tears. He must have been crying in the Garden. He doesn’t remember.

Drogon answers him by gently nudging the backs of his legs, forcing Jon to either walk forward or fall face-down into the ash again. Jon shuffles forward, stepping over piles of grass and ash, walking every time Drogon nudges him. Finally, at the center of the nest, he stops.

“Oh,” he says, the exclamation leaving him reflexively. He kneels down slowly. Drogon leans his face down, hovering it so it’s right beside Jon’s body. He’s looking at the eggs, too. One is a shining silver threaded with golden spirals, the second a pure, snow-white one with whispers of rose-pink, the third a bright blue one with purple-gray starbursts, and the last a deep red with streaks of stormy grey.

They’re beautiful. He’s surprised at how ardently he thinks that, how gently he reaches towards them.

“Are these yours?” he asks Drogon. They must be, but he doesn’t know anything about dragon reproduction. “Or are they old? Have they turned to stone?”

Drogon nudges him gently again, forcing him closer. His intention is clear: he wants Jon to touch one. Jon chooses the red one. He grips it gently and lifts it.

He knows the answer to his question at once. Beneath the strong scale-covered shell, Jon feels the

He looks back up at Drogon.

“Drogon,” he says, surprised. It feels no more foolish to speak to Drogon than it feels to speak to Ghost; both understand everything he says, he is sure of it. “You’re a father, too.”

Drogon leans down, nosing Jon’s hair gently. His rumbling is affectionate, yet Jon feels sad. Daenerys’s absence surrounds them. She’s the one who should be here. Not me, Jon thinks.

“Why are you showing these to me?” Jon asks Drogon. But the dragon just looks at him. “Why now? Why didn’t you take them to King’s Landing and give them to Daenerys before we left on that boat? Why?”

Maybe, if he had, everything would have been different. Maybe they could have found a different way to destroy Lord Bloodraven. Maybe they could have saved Dany.

Jon leans down and places the red egg back into the nest with the other three. He turns around. He’s growing upset quickly. “Take me back. I want to go back.”

He needs his daughter. Only the drumming of her little heart over his will calm him. He feels unsteady, agitated. Liable to lose his mind in his growing rage. He has to get back to Lyella. He has to remember why he must stay here, why he must keep fighting. The sorrow soaking his heart has almost made him forget. He is afraid of what he might do.

He climbs up onto Drogon, but Drogon doesn’t take flight. After a moment, Drogon shakes again, flinging Jon back into the nest. Jon inhales ash once more, and this time, he coughs for so long he grows lightheaded.

“What?” he demands, turning to look at Drogon. “What do you want from me!!”

Drogon nudges him forward. Hard. Jon stumbles, falling into the center of the nest, right beside the eggs. His face is right in front of the bright blue one. He stares at it as he tries to regain the breath that was knocked from him. It’s blue like Lyella’s gown, he thinks, his heart softening.

“I have to go back to Lyella,” he tells Drogon. He sits up and rises again, but he’s only taken a half-step when Drogon leans in, smacking his snout into Jon’s stomach. Jon goes flying again, this time landing on his bottom right beside the silver egg. Anger and frustration hatch in the center of his chest.

“What do you want!!”

Drogon grumbles lowly. Jon doesn’t try standing this time: he knows he’ll only get thrown back down here with these eggs. He tries a different approach. Instead of standing and walking away, he grabs each egg and sets it on his legs. All four lay heavy on his thighs. All four feel warm, alive.

It’s what Drogon wanted. Drogon drops to the ground, rumbling contentedly. He stirs the pillows of ash; Jon coughs and wheezes until it settles back down. When Drogon suddenly turns, breathing fire towards a pile of grass to Jon’s right, Jon jumps. For a moment, he thinks Drogon might be turning on him. But as the hot, flicking orange light fills the cavern, he realizes Drogon was only setting fire to a pile of dry grass and bits of driftwood, set far to the side away from the nest.

“All right,” Jon says tiredly. He gives up. “What now? I’m listening.”

Drogon settles his massive face between his front legs with a sigh, his eyes chained on the fire.
Watching. Waiting. Jon slowly looks towards the fire, too.

At first, all he sees are flames. The grass and bits of driftwood burn quickly, the flames tall and furious. Jon stares without blinking, looks without seeing. He stares until his eyes are watering. He stares until he can no longer make out distinct shapes of anything, until his vision is little more than a blurred vision of red-orange. Until he’s not in the cavern anymore.

He’s not frightened. That’s the first thing he realizes as he looks around himself. He had been in a cavern, but now he’s not, and that doesn’t alarm him at all. He feels calm, relaxed. Certain. *I’m where I’m supposed to be,* he thinks.

He’s not sure where that is at first. He sees tilled ground, sun-burnt men working beneath the sun, the shadow of wings overhead. But as he turns in place, he recognizes Dragonstone, looming up around him, cold and severe. He turns back around; he feels his heart lurch with sudden realization. He’s in Aegon’s Garden. Before it was a garden.

He’s waiting for somebody, only he’s not sure who, and he’s not sure why. He stands by a newly-planted rose bush. For a moment, the smell of the roses makes his heart sear with agony, but he doesn’t know why. Tranquility washes the pain out and makes him anew.

The man he’s waiting for appears at the gate of the garden. He is tall, strong, imposing: his silver-gold hair shines beneath the sun, and his purple eyes cut into Jon. Jon knows who he is immediately, though he has only ever seen portraits of him.

“Hello, Aegon,” the man greets, his voice a low rumble.

Jon has no idea how to address this man. No idea what to call him.

“Hello, Your Grace,” he settles on. He thinks of correcting him and telling him his name is Jon, but it doesn’t feel right.

He stands still and waits calmly as the man crosses the garden, coming to stand in front of him. When their eyes meet again, Aegon the Conqueror reaches out and sets his hand against Jon’s cheek.

“Aegon,” he says.

Jon’s eyes burn. Why do his eyes burn? “Yes?”

“No,” he says, “I am Aegon. Not ‘Your Grace’. That is your title now, by right of conquest and time.”

The burning in Jon’s eyes only grows. It’s as if that feeling of contentment is being lifted from him, exposing his grief one layer at a time. He’s beginning to suffocate again.

Aegon drops his hand from Jon’s cheek. He sets his hand on his shoulder instead, towering over him, his eyes full, at once, with grief.

“I know,” he tells Jon. His hand tightens on Jon’s shoulder. “I know.”

Jon inhales shallowly through his mouth. He squeezes his eyes shut against the heat behind them. Aegon squeezes his shoulder again.

“It’s time that we talk,” he tells him. “Come.”

Jon lets Aegon lead him through the garden, following blindly, his grief all-consuming. He wishes
his rage would come back: without it, he feels drained, defeated. Broken.

Aegon sits on a stone bench near the garden’s entrance. Jon sits beside him, burying his face into his hands. He breathes shallowly; it’s the best he can manage with how he is being smothered.

“She did not suffer in her last moments. She died feeling loved and protected— she died feeling understood.”

Jon wants to fight against those words. He wants to tell Aegon the Conqueror that he doesn’t care what her last moments were like: he just wants her to have more time, more moments. More time with him, more time with Lyaella. But he feels Aegon’s words soothe some ache in the deepest part of his heart. It doesn’t alleviate much of his pain, but it does some. He realizes he had been worried about her dying afraid. In pain. Feeling betrayed by Jon. But she hadn’t.

“Yet that fixes nothing,” Aegon says knowingly. “You just want her back.”

“Yes,” Jon says, his words muffled into his hands.

“You have given up.”

“No,” he says at once, refuting it. But he thinks of how he’d struck Longclaw against that wall, how he’d screamed and cried. His hopelessness commands his attention. “I can’t fix this. I tried. It didn’t work. I can’t fix this. I can’t stand by my promise to Daenerys or my promise to Lyaella. I failed them.”

Take me, too, he wants to beg. I failed. I failed. Take me now. Take me where she went.

“And if something doesn’t work the first way we attempt it, we give up?” Aegon asks. “We decide it’s impossible? Aegon, nothing is impossible for Daenerys.”

He wants to believe this man. But he’s weary and heartsick. He worries he won’t survive this grief much longer.

“You just haven’t looked for another way. You haven’t asked,” Aegon continues. “The Lord of Light is saying no to Kinvara’s resurrection attempts, yes. That’s true. She will never come back to you that way. It doesn’t matter how many times you ask Kinvara to try it, or any other priestess. But he is not saying she cannot come back at all. He is saying that is not the way. There is another way. You only have to look.”

For a moment, Jon sees the flames again. But when he blinks, he returns to the garden. He looks back at Aegon the Conqueror.

“I don’t even know what it is that I’m seeing,” he admits.

“You do. Who am I?” Aegon asks.

“Aegon the Conqueror.”

But then he’s not. Jon feels his stomach flutter oddly. Aegon the Conqueror’s face changes, his features becoming more beautiful, more elegant. He sits a head shorter than he had before. His hair is longer.

“Who am I?” he asks again.

Jon stares. “Rhaegar Targaryen.”
But then he’s not. His hair darkens and curls, his stature shortens. His eyes go from deep purple to deep gray. This time, Jon feels uneasy.

“Who am I?”

“Jon Snow,” he says hoarsely.

“No. Who am I?”

His mouth is dry. “Aegon Targaryen.”

But then he’s not. His dark hair becomes less curly, and it shortens to a close crop. His facial structure softens, becoming more elegant and thin—like Rhaegar. His eyes turn violet.

“Who am I?” he asks again.

Jon shakes his head. He feels tears in his eyes. He doesn’t know why.

“I don’t know.”

“Look closely. Who am I?”

Pain and love sink his heart down into the pit of his stomach. He sees it now, and it makes him begin to cry. It’s cruel.

“My son,” he whispers.

“Yes,” the man says. “Yet see how quickly I am not.”

In a confusing, upsetting flash, Jon watches him morph into a series of other people, other faces. Some he recognizes. Some he doesn’t. But they are all his family. For a brief second, he even sees an older version of Lyaella’s face.

“Now. Who am I?”

“R’hllor.” It’s hardly more than a whisper.

He turns into a woman that looks so much like Dany that it makes Jon look away, upset. R’hllor—as Queen Rhaella—smiles.

“Very good,” she praises. “Yes. You have been very upset with me. How can I comfort you?”

Jon shakes his head, unable to speak the words. You know my answer to that already, he thinks. R’hllor frowns.

“Do you understand why she had to die, Aegon?” she asks.

“Lord Bloodraven made her cut her hands open. I couldn’t protect her. She lost so much blood, and then the baby came—”

“No. You misunderstand,” she says patiently. “That is how she died. Do you know why?”

“She…” he stops. He doesn’t. He can’t see any sense in it. To him, it was brutal and pointless.

“I know it seemed that way to you,” R’hllor says softly. “But it was the furthest thing from senseless. Everything has been leading up to that battle for hundreds of years now. Thousands. Do you know
who Daenerys Targaryen is?”

“The Princess Who Was Promised,” Jon guesses. He sounds tired to his own ears.

R’hllor smiles again. Queen Rhaella’s face lights up with the radiance of it just as Dany’s does.

“A meddlesome prophecy. Most are. My priestesses, no matter how well-trained, hardly ever get it right. Some elements are true, but things are less rigid than that. Daenerys Targaryen was the one to bring the dawn, but she was not alone. At her side, you and Lyanna Targaryen. You all played pivotal roles in the downfall of the darkness. You were all promised. That woman, once a babe born into terrible circumstances, now a rescue of the people, a mother of all those in need, was chosen by me to be my agent. And you know why. Who is Daenerys Targaryen?”

She has more titles than he has strength to say them. More roles to more people than he can list. My wife, he thinks, but that’s not all she is. My queen, but she’s more than that. The Mother of Dragons, but it goes beyond that, too.

It settles over him gradually. Like new snowflakes drifting on top of well-packed snow. He had realized this already.

“Love.”

Queen Rhaella’s smile is soft.

“In a way, yes— love has many faces. She is growth. Spring. Freedom— rebirth. Fire and blood. There are many names for it. In short, she is everything Bloodraven couldn’t be— everything he could never overcome, could never match. She is no ordinary girl, and she is no saint. Make no mistake: she’s capable of great violence, capable of being terrible. But at the core of everything she does, there is love in every reason. I need no saints at my side; saints cannot do the terrible things that, at times, must be done. I need conquerors.”

Jon thinks of the war that had raged within her body on that boat. The fight to bring Lyanna into the world while simultaneously taking Bloodraven out of it. The ultimate conquering of her will over Bloodraven’s. No matter how terrible. No matter the cost.

“Now we will have thousands of years of peace from the Great Other’s tyranny. Not forever… he’ll rebound as he always does. He’ll eventually find somebody else powerful, selfish, and cruel, somebody he can use. But we’ll have a good long while. And that peace will be found beneath House Targaryen’s rule. You and Daenerys will realign the world. You’ll fix the cruel, errant paths some of my priestesses have gone down. You’ll leave behind a legacy of justice and prosperity. And that is possible thanks to her— and thanks to you. I know you will not believe me right now, but I chose you just the same as I chose her, for the same reasons.”

Jon feels his rage ignite again, a fierce burning in the pit of his stomach. Something keeps it from burning as brightly as it should, but he clings to what little heat he can muster.

“I won’t rule without her. I will not do it. I won’t do your bidding if she’s ashes in a pyre or decaying in a crypt. What I said to Kinvara— I meant that. I still mean it. I will destroy everything if you force me through life without her. That is a promise.”

“I know it is. I have seen what you’re capable of. Why do you think I’m speaking with you now?” R’hllor asks. Still patient. Still calm. Inside Queen Rhaella’s form, it appears motherly, and for a second, Jon wants to lean in and hide his face into her neck. He turns away instead. “Aegon. Look at me.”
He does. R’hllor is frowning.

“When I say I chose Daenerys and I chose you, I chose you together. Do you understand? Ice and fire—you are whole. There is not one without the other. I brought you back to life because you had yet to become whole. And I will bring Daenerys back to make you both whole again.”

Jon reaches forward without planning to and takes R’hllor’s hands (Rhaella’s hands). He holds desperately, his heart writhing in his chest, so afraid to believe. So afraid to trust. So afraid to have faith.

“When? How?”

R’hllor shifts before his eyes: he’s Aegon the Conqueror again. Jon doesn’t let go of his hands. R’hllor turns towards the men planting the trees and rose bushes in Aegon’s Garden, the garden that Jon had just stood in only hours ago, the trees that towered far above his head and created a dark, piney haven.

“How strange it is, Aegon’s servants whispered, that a conqueror is planting anything at all,” R’hllor comments. He and Jon watch a man’s calloused hands pat soil around a sapling. Jon thinks it might be the massive tree he’d chopped into with his sword. “Yet, in the space of this beautiful world, it makes sense. When you burn down a forest, the ashes make the soil more fertile. And eventually, in spring, everything returns. Everything begins again. Stronger, better than before. People view fire as violent destruction, as evil. ‘Hellfire’, they even say. Fire is not what they make it out to be. Fire is rebirth. Nothing less, nothing more.”

Jon thinks he understands, but he wants it in explicit terms. He wants to know exactly what he must do to bring his wife back. There can be no room for error. No room for failure.

“I must burn her?”

Aegon the Conqueror’s lips twitch up as if he wants terribly to laugh.

“You must try to burn her,” he corrects. “Do you understand why?”

“Suddenly you care about me understanding, when before you were content to let Dany and I stumble through blind,” Jon snaps. He can’t stop himself from it.

Aegon blinks. “Before, your ignorance was crucial to what had to happen. Now, your knowledge is. Do you understand why you must burn her?”

No. He doesn’t. He waits, already beginning to feel his eyes burn at the thought of placing his wife on a pyre. What if the magic is gone? What if he lights her—and she turns to ash?

“She and Lord Bloodraven were tied when she died. If I bring her back right now in her bed in Dragonstone, he’ll come right back with her. After all she went through to destroy him, I would never do that to her. Not even if I could devise some desperate way to limit his threat or cripple his power. I would never disrespect her in that way. But fire…” he trails off. His smile is true and consuming now. “Fire is my gift. I have shared it with only her, and she has made beautiful use of that gift throughout her life. When we set her ablaze, I will return her to you. Because Lord Bloodraven cannot follow. He cannot survive the fire—he cannot survive the rebirth. Not as Daenerys Targaryen can.”

“If I put her on a pyre and light it, she won’t burn? You’ll bring her back?” asks Jon.

“Yes. Do you know what else to burn with her, Aegon?”
He almost sounds curious, as if he’s testing Jon. The answer seems so obvious to Jon that his curiosity makes him second guess it; perhaps the answer isn’t as clear as he thinks it is.

“The eggs?”

R’hllor smiles, pleased.

“Very good.”

“And how do I know that I haven’t just gone mad or passed out in that cavern, that this all isn’t some hallucination I’m having? How do I know you’re not just the Great Other pretending to be R’hllor, the Great Other trying to trick me into destroying Daenerys?”

All valid concerns of his, all genuine fears. After what he and Dany had been through, he has no trust in mind games. No trust in visions.

“Ah, Aegon,” R’hllor says, still smiling. “This is where faith comes in. Can you shoulder the weight of it? Can you do it for Daenerys?”

It’s immediate: “I can do anything for Daenerys.”

“I know you can,” he tells Jon. He stands. “One last gift I give to you: remember, you are part of a whole. What the parts endure, the whole does, too.”

Jon shakes his head. “You know that makes no sense to me.”

His smile grows. Jon watches him shift into someone different; this time, after seeing it so many times, it doesn’t surprise or alarm him at all. The shift is natural.

“It doesn’t now, but I know that it will,” R’hllor answers. He smiles— Lyanna Stark smiles. “Would you believe me if I told you that I’m proud of you?”

Jon feels an indescribable longing inside his chest. He wants to stand and hold his mother in his arms. He wants to tell her how sorry he is for everything, how much he needed her love as a boy. How much he still needs it now. But she is not his mother— not really.

“Not yet,” Jon answers. “Maybe one day. If she comes back to me. If I’m able to stand by my promise to my daughter. Maybe then I’ll believe you’re proud. Maybe then I’ll be proud, too.”

“Look for me when you feel it. I will be there.”

He starts to walk away, but Jon calls after him, stopping him.

“How will I remember this? I was here before. In the flames. And it all slipped away. You tried to show me what would happen on that boat. I lost it.”

“No,” R’hllor corrects. “You retained exactly what you needed to retain. I needed you to feel frightened of the voyage— I needed you to prepare for it as if something terrible was going to happen. And you did. You brought your best men— men who helped get Daenerys to Dragonstone — and you brought the maester— who helped Daenerys live long enough to birth her daughter. You knew something wasn’t right, and so, when the time came to react, you reacted quickly and bravely. Throughout it all. You will retain from this talk exactly what you need to. Do not worry about that.”

Jon sees brightness flare in front of him. It separates them. He blinks, trying to clear his vision, but the flames dance faster in front of his eyes. The garden sits just behind the haze of the heat. And
when he blinks again, he’s back in the cavern, staring at the quick-dying fire, those four dragon eggs heavy and warm on his legs.

He sits in silence for a long while, his mind churning. For the first time in a very long time, he feels truly calm. Like a storm has passed within him.

“It’s time to go back,” Jon tells Drogon. He carefully gathers the eggs, wedging them close together in his arms so that he can safely cradle all four. They burn against his heart. The weight is incredible. “Take me to Daenerys.”

This time, Drogon flattens himself to the floor of the cavern patiently and holds still as Jon carefully shimmies up, mindful of the eggs clutched to his heart. As soon as he’s seated, he tightens his thighs around Drogon for purchase and slides two of the eggs down the front of his tunic. They stop at his belt, the fabric of his tunic keeping them in place. They burn against the skin of his stomach. The other two— the blue and the red— he clutches tightly in his left arm, and he holds onto Drogon with his right.

“Go slow,” he asks of him, but it’s unnecessary. Drogon knows.

This time, as they fly slowly over Dragonstone, Jon turns his face to the moon.

X.

“Can you re-stitch her hands?”

His sister glances up at his face as she passes Lyaella to him. Jon takes his baby carefully, mindful of her heavy head, and cradles her in his arms. He can still feel the heat from where those eggs had been— two at the crook of his left arm, two beneath his shirt— and when he brings Lyaella close to his heart, he wonders if she can feel the residual warmth, too.

“Daenerys?” Arya finally clarifies quietly, though she knows very well who Jon is speaking of.

“Yes. Can you stitch her hands up?” he asks again.

Lyaella’s eyes open at the sound of his voice; she peers up at him, her gaze wandering over his face. Jon feels the warmth in his heart turn into a soft smile. He leans closer and gently kisses Lyaella’s forehead. He holds her closer, overcome for a moment with love so fierce it has the same intensity of the pressure of his grief. Like his grief, it is a consuming inferno. Like his grief, it makes his throat narrow, his eyes burn. But this ache doesn’t hurt.


Even with the peace from those flames still flooding his body, those words make his stomach drop. He protects himself by focusing on Lyaella. On growth— on the future. He strokes her soft cheek with his finger, smiling down at her as her eyes drift shut again and her face turns towards his touch.

“It matters. When she comes back, her hands must be as fixed as they can be. I don’t want her to suffer.”

Arya is quiet for so long Jon thinks she’s left. Finally, she says: “Kinvara tried two times. It didn’t work.”

“Because she wasn’t doing it the right way. There’s another way,” Jon answers.

“How?”
“We lay her to rest.”

For a time, all he can hear is the fire crackling in the hearth, the wind whistling through the Stone Drum, Lyaella’s steady breaths as she settles to sleep.

“We’re going to bury her?” Arya’s voice crackles like the logs in the fire.

“No, not bury her,” Jon answers. He strokes Lyaella’s silver hair. “We burn our dead.”

That makes it worse for Arya. Jon can tell. When he looks over at her, she’s got tears in her dark eyes.

“If we’re burning her, why does it matter what her hands are like? What does any of it matter?”

“It matters to me. Please, Arya. This isn’t the end. She’ll come back. And I want her to be able to hold Lyaella when she does.”

Jon looks at Arya, at the orange light from the fireplace slanting over her uneasy expression, at her wide, haunted eyes. She doesn’t seem to know what to say. She thinks I’ve gone mad, Jon realizes.

“Jon…how long has it been since you’ve slept? Since you’ve eaten? I haven’t even seen you drink water. Do you know what you’re saying?”

“Yes. This is the way, Arya. I know it. I know it,” he insists. “Trust me.”

“I do. More than anyone else in the world. I always have. But what you’re saying…it doesn’t make any sense. If we burn her—and she actually burns—she’ll just be gone, Jon. And if she doesn’t burn, we’ll just…we’ll just have her body. Like we do now. Just a body. A body that is going to start to rot.” She walks over to him. When she stops in front of him, he reaches up and brushes the tears from her cheeks. She traps his hand, holding it, mustering the courage to say something he knows will be terrible. He’s right. “We could build a crypt in King’s Landing. We could put her there. Have a statue made of her—”

“No. We burn our dead,” he repeats firmly. “That is the way. That’s the way it’s always been for Targaryens. I understand what you’re saying, Arya, but I need you to believe me. This is the way. You’ll see. She’s going to come back to us.”

He can’t tell for sure if she believes him, but he knows she supports him. Even if all she’s supporting is madness.

“Okay,” she says. She nods firmly and lowers her hand from his. “I’ll do what I can with her hands, or I’ll try to.”

Jon shifts Lyaella into his left arm and reaches out with his right. He pulls Arya to his side. He kisses the top of her head. He’s full of warmth again. This time, he turns it into words.

“You did right by her, Arya. I’m proud of you. You never let me down.”

She hides her face into his arm. He lets her drain the pressure out.

“I miss her,” she finally says, her voice choked.

“You’ll see her again,” Jon promises. “I will, too. And Lyaella. Soon, she’ll be back with us.”

From the way Arya cries harder, he guesses she doesn’t believe him yet. He guesses part of her thinks he’s truly gone mad in his grief. Let her, he thinks. She’ll soon see.
XI.

Only an hour out from Dragonstone’s shore, Ghost suddenly drops to the deck.

Ser Davos thinks he’s died for a moment. He hurries over to the direwolf, kneeling beside him, his heart clenched in fear. No. Not Ghost, too.

But when he sets his hand in the direwolf’s fur, he feels his heart beating. His body rises and falls as he breathes.

He’s not dead. He’s sleeping. It’s the first time he’s settled since Ser Davos let him out of his enclosure. He hasn’t even seen him sit once since then, much less sleep.

“Is he… dead?” Lord Tyrion asks uneasily.

“No,” Ser Davos says. He sits back on the deck. Thinking. “He’s sleeping.”

He grabs onto a barrel behind him and uses it to hoist himself back upright. He turns to look at Dragonstone, looming sharply in the hazy distance.

“Can we go any faster?” he asks Lord Tyrion.

“Not unless you’re hiding a hundred strong rowing men behind you. We’ll be there soon. It’s good that he’s calmed, right?”

“Perhaps,” Ser Davos allows. He thinks of Jon Snow, gasping back to life on that table. “Yes. Perhaps.”

XII.

The red egg he puts over her heart, the softest patch of dark grey touching the point that dagger had once been buried.

The blue he sets just below her breasts. It appears less bright underneath the sun; it turns softer, a blue-violet.

The silver-rose one he puts on her stomach, and beside it, the snowy white one.

When he’s finished, he sinks to his knees beside the pyre. He casts his eyes on her face— still, beautiful. Calm. He reaches up, brushing his thumb over her lips, across her cheeks, over her eyelids. He feels her eyelashes brush his palm one last time. She feels so cold. I must light the fire soon, he thinks. I must warm her.

“Are you ready?” Grey Worm asks.

“Almost,” Jon answers. Does that voice come from him? It sounds so sad, so frightened. But Jon doesn’t feel afraid. Does he?

He reaches towards Kinvara’s outstretched hand. He takes the crown from her. It’s nothing more than wild roses from the garden twisted together by Arya’s hand, but as soon as it touches Daenerys’s hair, it will be a crown fit for a queen. Her beauty and power will make it so.

He stands, but he doesn’t set the crown on the queen’s head. He turns and meets Arya’s eyes. She’s standing off to the side with the people who arrived only two hours ago: Ser Davos, Lord Tyrion, Sansa.
Arya understands what he’s asking. When she approaches, they trade off: Jon takes his daughter from her arms, she takes the crown. Jon presses his cheek to the crown of Lyaella’s head as Arya gently rests the crown of roses on Dany’s.

For a moment, standing side by side, Arya and Jon just look at her. Beyond how pale she is, how stiff, how cold, she just looks like the woman they loved. To Jon, she looks like she could be asleep. He’s glad for it.

“I’m ready now,” Jon tells Grey Worm. Again, his voice doesn’t sound ready. He hears tears. And when he touches his cheeks, his fingers come back wet. But inside, he is calm. Protected. Someone—or something—is keeping that pressure from smothering him.

He walks over with Lyaella and returns to Rhaegar Targaryen’s side. His father looks at him, and Jon looks back.

“How are you feeling?” Rhaegar asks.

“Okay,” Jon says. He's not really sure he feels anything at all.

Arya and Grey Worm look over at him. He realizes they think he’s talking to them. They think he’s said okay to give the cue to light the pyre.

“Wait,” he says, stopping Grey Worm as he reaches for the torch. “Not us.”

He turns his face towards the sky where Drogon circles above. The cries and screams he’d given earlier, when they first carried Daenerys’s body out for him to see, have given way to silence. To determination.

“Are you helping him, too?” Jon asks Rhaegar.

Rhaegar smiles. “He needs no help. Dragons are one with me. I am one with them. I’m not helping you, either.”

_You must be_, Jon thinks. _Or else I would be on the ground right now. I wouldn’t be able to stand. I wouldn’t_.


Drogon swoops lower.

“She’s beautiful,” Jon hears, and when he turns to look at Rhaegar, he’s King Aerys. He’s looking at Daenerys on the pyre. Jon’s gaze turns to his newborn daughter’s face.

“Yes,” Jon and Aerys say, their voices merged. “Just like her mother.”

Drogon circles above Daenerys, so close that the wind from his wings beats into them. The baby in Lyaella’s wet nurse’s arms—her own child—begins screaming, but in Jon’s arms, Lyaella turns her face towards the wind as it brushes her face. Her blue gown flutters around her. Her small fists open and close as if she’s reaching towards Drogon.

“Jon.”

Aerys is no longer Aerys. Jon feels as if Drogon’s wings are beating inside his own chest for a moment. Ned Stark, his father, looks steadily at him, his dark eyes misty.

“Father,” Jon tries to say, but the word sticks in his throat. He wants to reach for him, but his arms
won’t lift.

“You are a true Stark,” Ned Stark says.

He’s Rhaegar. “A true Targaryen.”

He’s Maester Aemon. “Your duty is a duty to love. Above all else. No more and no less than that. Shouldn’t we all smile knowing this? What a beautiful gift. What a gift.”

“She is,” Jon and Aerys say. Jon and Rhaegar. Jon and Dany.

He’s staring at the violet of her eyes. His vision blurs with tears. Seconds later, a vicious burst of heat slams into his face. The roaring sound of Drogon’s fire makes his ears ring, and when he looks back at the pyre, it’s alive with flames more violent than Jon has ever seen.

He looks for Arya. She’s staring at the fire, jaw set, tears rolling down her stoic face. Sansa has looked away. Lord Tyrion is weeping on his knees. Ser Davos — he’s looking at Jon.

Davos comes to him, taking the place of R’hllo, and he pulls Jon to his side and holds him tightly.

Jon doesn’t watch the flames. He watches Lyella’s face. The way the orange light glows against her silver hair makes it look golden. She is golden. Perfect in every way— his daughter.

“I love you,” he whispers to her. He kisses her soft cheek. When he turns and holds her out to Ser Davos, Ser Davos takes her by instinct. And quickly realizes what it means that he has.

“No,” he says at once, holding Lyella back out to Jon. “No! Take her back, Jon! Take her back! She needs you. Take her back! Jon!”

But he is one half of a whole. Until the pieces come together again, nothing will be the way it should be. What each part can endure, so can the whole.

“Jon!” Sansa. Arya. Both of them. “Jon, what are you doing?!”

He approaches the pyre.

At his side, Aegon the Conqueror.

“You trust me now,” Aegon says. He knows.

“Yes,” Jon admits. “I do. It makes sense. I see it now. I see everything.”

“Go to her. She’s going to need you.”

Nothing could hold him back. Not from her. His blood— his duty.

Above the roaring of the fire and the screams of those rushing to pull him back, to restrain him, to stop him, he hears Kinvara. He hears her ongoing prayer. The words weave and dance with one another. They’re sweet as the roses in Dany’s hair.

As he comes within a breath of the flames, he sees movement deep within them. A shifting of silver.

He feels his heart rise up with it— it’s a gentle, warm sensation. And when he steps into the flames and sets his knee atop the pyre, he feels pain, but nothing like he should. It’s nothing more than the Southern sun against his bare skin. It singes, but it doesn’t blister. It burns, but it doesn’t destroy.
He climbs onto the edge of the pyre. He can’t hear anything now beyond the howling of the flames. They’re a fierce, brutal wind against him, a heat that takes the breath from him. His eyes stream with tears. Dany’s dress is burning away, leaving just those dragon eggs on her skin, nothing else. Her rose-crown is now a crown of fire. But her skin doesn’t burn. Jon reaches out and grasps her hands. He closes his eyes. *She won’t be alone when she wakes. I won’t let her be alone,* he thinks.

He doesn’t know if he’s burning alive. He doesn’t think he is: surely it would hurt more than this. Surely he’d be dead already. He doesn’t know, and he doesn’t care. If he and Dany are a whole, and this is her gift, he’s sheltered in their unity. He’s not afraid.

He lowers down in the roaring heat and lays beside her, her hands still gripped in his. *It’s just a matter of time. It’s only a matter of time.*

He hears two things above the howling inferno: an echoing crack, and a soft gasp.

His eyes find the red egg first. He watches, transfixed, as the scaled shell shifts its broken pieces. As a deep red snout, tiny as Lyaella’s little fist, pushes out. The second it does, he feels Dany’s hands tighten around his: fierce, panicked. He sits up and looks down at her. He thinks his tears must turn to steam the second they roll down his face, because he can’t feel them against his cheeks, but he feels them burning his eyes all the same. He feels them clamoring up his throat.

He looks at Daenerys, and Daenerys looks back at him. Violet eyes wide in confusion, in panic. Each breath is ragged, gasping. She pushes against his hands, horrified, and Jon realizes at once what she’s trying to do, trying to say. She’s trying to push him from the pyre.

“It’s okay,” he reassures her, and he feels how she shakes. He remembers how it feels. He remembers the fear, the uncertainty, the sorrow. “You’re back. It’s okay. The fire is okay, too.”

For the first time in such a long time, it is okay. His skin, pinked and sore, is little worse than windburn. And she’s alive. She draws in another jagged breath, her chest rising and falling rapidly, and then Jon sees her hands fly to her stomach. She doesn’t touch her empty womb, but she touches the eggs. Her eyes lock with his again, and in hers, he sees tears.

“Our daughter is safe. She’s with Ser Davos. She’s safe,” Jon reassures her. He leans his face over hers. As he presses his lips to her lips— they’re dry and cracked from the heat— he hears another crack. It echoes through his heart. Dany’s hands grip his face then, tight, desperate. The thick sutures in her palms scratch his skin, but it feels good. It feels good to be touched by her again— even hurt by her. Anything by her hand. Anything.

She’s crying as she kisses him, and he’s crying, too, though he never feels the tears. He sets his hand on her chest beside that red egg. Beneath his palm, he feels her heart, pounding steadily. Against his hand, he feels the pierce of tiny claws.

“I— I— I was—” she can’t seem to say much more than that. Jon kisses her again when she gives up, holding her so close the tiny red dragon is pressed gently between their hearts. He feels it kneading at his bare chest like a kitten might.

There’s another crack.

“You’re back with me. You’re back,” Jon whispers. He strokes her face with his sore palms. He’s shaking. He feels dizzy. “You’re here with me. You’re safe.”

She clings to him, her naked body pressed to his, and they hold each other until they hear the fourth and final crack. Until the flames die down. Until they can feel the four newborn dragons curled
against their bare skin.

The roaring weakens to crackling. The crackling weakens to silence.

Jon turns to look at the sky. Overhead, Drogon makes triumphant spirals through the air. His cries are a song the newborn dragons soon mimic, rising and falling in a melodic tempo. It makes Jon shiver.

He has no idea what those standing around the pyre are thinking. He only cares about Dany. He looks back at his wife. She’s covered in soot—he must be, too—but her skin isn’t even pink like Jon’s is. She’s unblemished, unhurt. Unburnt. She is looking up at the pale-blue sky, her lips parted, her eyes shining in wonder.

“Dany?” Jon whispers.

Slowly, she tears her eyes from the sky. She looks at him, breathing rapidly, brimming with shock. With adrenaline. With hope.

“Would you like to see Lyaella?”

The last thing he sees before his vision goes black is Dany sitting up.

XIII.

He wakes to something cool and wet brushing his forehead.

“It’s just heat exhaustion. He’ll be fine,” Kinvara soothes. “Rest, Daenerys.”

“You’re certain?”

“I haven’t seen him take so much as a sip of water since you died. I imagine the heat of that fire was just too much for him,” Arya says.

Daenerys sounds mildly annoyed. Beneath it, her concern is deep and audible. “What— was he was planning on bringing me back by dehydrating himself?”

“Well, he and Arya came very close to waging war on the Lord of Light, so fasting would, perhaps, be one of the less insane ideas I’ve heard recently,” Kinvara says.

There’s a pause. The cold cloth moves down Jon’s neck; it feels so wonderful against his burning skin that he nearly groans in relief.

“Arya?” Dany’s voice is flat.

Arya sniffs. “So what if we were?”

There’s another pause, and then Dany laughs. It’s a bright, sparkling sound. She sounds strong, Jon realizes, and he feels his heart flutter in his chest.

“I’m here, so you must have won your war,” Daenerys comments.

“No, I think we just realized we’re all fighting on the same side.” Arya sighs abruptly, frustrated. “Seven hells. Give me that rag and rest. You don’t need to do that while you’re feeding the baby. You just came back from the dead. The only thing you should be doing is sleeping.”

There’s no pause in the stroke of that wet cloth over Jon’s heated skin. He guesses no one is willing
“I can do both just fine. Kinvara, could you send someone to the kitchens? See if we might have chilled mead for the king when he wakes.”

“Yes, certainly. And when do you plan to rest?”

“I’m resting right now. Don’t worry for me. I have everything I need.”

It’s peaceful when it’s just Jon, Arya, Dany, and Lyaella. Dany cools his seared skin, and beyond the sound of Lyaella nursing, it’s quiet.

“You make it seem easy. She put up a fuss these past three days with Tirina.”

“Three days? Jon thinks. He feels a thrill of genuine shock. How could it have only been three days? To him, it feels like an eternity since they left their burning ship. An eternity since the world had felt like the world rather than a surreal nightmare.

“Did she?” Dany sounds concerned. “I hope she wasn’t hungry the whole time.”

“No, we managed, but she was fussy,” Arya repeats. Her voice softens. “She wasn’t like this.”

“Well,” Dany says, and Jon hears the way her voice trembles with emotion. “I’m her mother. She and I—we know each other. She’s been with me through it all. She’s part of me.”

“She looks so happy.”

“She must know she’s loved. Protected.” Jon hears the soft sound of a kiss. “Tell me about the past three days. Where did Lyaella sleep? There in the cradle?”

“No. In Jon’s arms mainly, or mine.”

Jon hears Dany’s smile in her voice. “Good. And Drogon? Has he been eating?”

“I’m not sure. I never saw him. I think Jon did, though. He came back covered in soot and dirt last night.”

“With the eggs,” Dany guesses.

“You’ll have to ask him about the eggs. The first time I saw them was when he set them on you on that pyre.”

“Hm,” Dany says thoughtfully. “Well, I suppose it’s a good thing Lyaella doesn’t use the cradle. The dragons seem to like it.”

Arya laughs, genuinely amused by something Jon can’t see. When Dany’s laughter joins it, Jon smiles. He’s weak and tired, but he could sit up now. His dizziness has passed. Yet, selfishly, he just wants to rest here a bit longer and listen to Dany’s voice. She sounds so strong, so like herself. It is healing like nothing else.

“And did you do this?” Dany asks Arya curiously. Jon, his eyes still shut, is unsure what she’s gesturing at. Her voice is tilted up with pride at whatever it is.

“No,” Arya says. “Jon, actually.”

When Dany laughs this time, it’s bursting with so much delight that it’s nearly a giggle. Jon can’t
keep from beaming, though neither woman sees it.

“Truly?”

“Yes. He was very serious about it, too. He redid it so many times. It sounds funny, I know, but…it wasn’t at the time.” Arya grows quieter. “I was frightened, Daenerys. I thought he was going mad. Really going mad. I thought you were going to stay dead, and Jon was going to become…not Jon. It was terrible.”

“Tell me.”

As Arya paints a picture of the past three days for Daenerys, Jon finds himself viewing his own actions in a different light. He realizes that any sane person would have thought he had lost his mind, especially at the pyre when he’d been talking to himself. When he’d walked straight into the flames.

The cool cloth stills over Jon’s heart as Arya’s words trail off. Dany rests her hand over his scar. Her sutures scratch at his skin.

“He knew what to do. I see how it appeared, but he knew. He saw a different way. He was never mad.”

“Apparently not,” Arya agrees. “But I worried at the time all the same.” Jon hears the bed creak, followed by a familiar grumble. “Oh, sorry, Ghost, but there’s truly no room for you on the bed, so it’s not really my fault. I’m going to go check on that mead; it’s taking them too long. Do you need anything from the kitchens? I know Kinvara said you should take mainly liquids for the next couple of hours, but I could find mint tea.”

“Yes, thank you,” Daenerys says. “I’m still thirsty, actually.”

“You have been dead for three days.”

“Fair point,” she laughs.

Jon listens to Arya’s departing footsteps. He hears a splash as Dany dunks the rag into cool water again, followed by trickling as she lifts it back out. She brings it to his upper chest, her caresses slow and gentle. The water feels incredibly pleasant.

“You don’t have anything to say?” she asks. She moves the cloth up to his neck. “I know you’re awake.”

He smiles. Seconds later, he feels her soft, full lips press to his smile. His heart expands; it becomes the size of two. He reaches up and touches her hair, his fingers trembling. But not in fear. Not ever again.

She’s looking at him when he finally opens his eyes. The violet of her eyes is a balm cooler than any cool water could be. She’s a vision of life: he studies her soft smile, her happy eyes, her flushed cheeks. Lyaella is in her arms where she belongs, her delicate fist resting on her mother’s breast as she nurses, her eyes shut and her little body blissfully relaxed. Jon smiles at the sight of her contentment; the last of that awful pressure eases off his chest, leaving only love and relief in its place.

“It’s difficult to know what to say,” Jon admits. Ghost— curled at Dany’s feet at the end of the bed — lifts his head at the sound of Jon’s voice. Jon leans forward and scratches his head.

“If anyone in the world would know what to say to someone after they’ve been resurrected, it’d be
“No. Because I know there’s nothing to say. It feels strange. It will feel strange for a while. But it gets better. And I'm here.”

He gives Ghost a final pat on the head and then straightens, turning his attention back to Dany and Lyaella. Dany’s posture is steady and strong; there is no whisper of weakness, no indication to any outsiders that she had been dead less than a couple hours prior. She’s watching Lyaella’s face, her own consumed by a smile as warm and bright as the flames Jon had stepped into. She strokes their daughter cheek with her knuckle, her love so fierce Jon can feel the way it’s choking her. It’s visible.

“I don’t know if it feels strange to me as much as surreal,” Dany admits. She holds Lyaella securely, protecting her latch at her breast, and then leans over so she can kiss her hair. “Really, it feels as if I’m in a dream. The best dream. I still haven’t decided if it’s real or not.”

“It’s real,” Jon assures her, thinking of the brutality of the past three days. If it weren’t real, he would’ve woken simply from the pain. “How do you feel, Dany? How are your hands?”

“I feel happy,” she answers at once. He cannot doubt the veracity of that; her joy is radiant. She looks down at her hands a few seconds later, and Jon follows her gaze. "Arya stitched my hands so thoroughly I doubt the stitches will ever come out. They're sore— I'm sore— but I feel strong. And indescribably relieved.” She meets his eyes. Hers soften. “A bit guilty, too.”

A bewildered laugh escapes from Jon. “Guilty? What do you have to feel guilty for? You saved our daughter, Dany. You saved us.”

With her eyes still locked on his, she reaches up. He follows her hand. Her fingers touch to the wound at her left breast. Arya or Kinvara— one of them— had put a couple stitches into it. Jon sees a tiny bead of blood at the edges of the wound. Instead of frightening him, it reassures him. Blood is life, and the fact that it’s pumping through her is a blessing.

“I don’t… I don’t remember. I know someone helped me. I don’t remember who, though. But I think…” she trails off. She blinks hard against the moisture rising to her eyes. “I think it was you. And I’m sorry, Jon. I’m sorry that you had to do that. I’m sorry, I never meant to—”

She breaks off as his hands lift to cradle her face. He kisses her softly, gently, his own heart aching.

“I’m sorry,” he tells her, his voice low and trembling with emotion. “I’m sorry for leaving Longclaw in the room. I’m so sorry, Dany.”

“No—”

“Yes. I made a mistake, and it cost you your life.”

“No. It cost me three days,” she corrects him. When she smiles, it’s tentative, almost shy. Like she’s testing the waters. Jon finds it so endearing that he can’t help but smile back. When she leans in and kisses him again, he feels all the pain and guilt knotted in his stomach loosen and unravel.

“Yes, well, those three days without you felt like an eternity,” Jon admits, his lips brushing hers. For a second, his grief swallows him whole again, and his eyes burn. “I thought I lost you.”

“You didn’t. You got me back. At great cost to your skin, too,” Daenerys whispers. She strokes lightly over his collarbone, and when Jon looks down at his body for the first time, he sees his skin is singed a sore pink. Yet he, by all accounts, should be naught but charred bones, so he can’t find it in
him to lament it too much. “What happened? With the pyre. With the eggs. With Drogon. With you.”

Jon’s heart jolts. The eggs— he’d forgotten. He turns, his eyes seeking that cradle, and what he sees makes him laugh just as Arya and Dany had. Four newborn dragons, all curled together in a spiral. The red dragon’s tail twitches in his sleep as Jon laughs.

“I never realized how cute they are as babies,” Jon admits.

“They’re more precious than almost anything in the world— and a great deal of trouble. You do realize, in many ways, you’ve given us quadruplets.”

He hadn’t. He smiles; it’s his turn to be sheepish. Dany laughs and kisses him again. This time, she lingers, her hand on his cheek. She peers into his eyes when their kiss ends, searching. Something she sees makes her soften. She strokes his cheek and leans in to kiss him again, this time gently, soothingly.

“I missed so much,” she realizes. “So much happened while I was away. To you.”

It feels like decades, yet he also can’t shake the feeling that nothing of any importance happened at all with her gone. He had spoken directly to the Lord of Light, yet that feels less real than her lips do against his right now. It feels less important.

“Nothing important.”

“Considering we’ve got four more dragons today than we did three days ago, I must disagree with you.”

“It’s nothing that can’t wait until later. Let’s just be together. I just want to hold you, kiss you… I don’t want to think about the past three days. I just want to be with you. Is that okay?”

She rests her head against his shoulder and leans into him. He wraps his arm around her at once, overcome with emotion at warmth of her body against his. He wants to shield her in his embrace and never let go.

She kisses his shoulder. “That’s more than okay.”

He holds her close to him and counts each of her breaths. He’s at one hundred twenty when Arya returns with an assortment of drink options. Jon doesn’t realize how thirsty he is until he takes his first sip; soon, he’s drained two glasses of water and half a tankard of mead. Dany drinks nearly as much as he does, and every time she kisses him, the coolness on her breath from her mint tea makes him shiver.

Dany nurses Lyaella until Lyaella slips into a contented slumber, and then Dany relaxes against the pillows, Lyaella fast asleep between her breasts. Jon strokes Lyaella’s back as she sleeps, his cheek pressed to Dany’s shoulder, his heart soaked through with love. When he feels strong enough to talk about the past three days, he begins with what’s most important: he tells her that seeing her have Lyaella was the most powerful and moving thing he’s ever seen in his life, that despite how traumatic the memory is, he still gets chills when he thinks of her hand around his, Lyaella’s scalp against his fingers. Beautiful and terrible, he deems the experience. And Dany laughs. Like me, she jests. And for a bit, they don’t talk much more because he’s too busy kissing her.

He tells her how proud he is of her, but words don’t do it justice. He tries to tell her how deeply he missed her, but there doesn’t yet exist a word in either the Common Tongue or Valyrian to express the degree to which he missed her. They talk about Lyaella for a long while, both of the same mind:
she’s the most perfect thing that ever breathed. The most wondrous thing that had ever happened to them. The greatest gift.

Following talk of Lyaella, Jon’s story about the Lord of Light seems feeble in comparison. Dany listens quietly as he tells her all about his vision in the flames with as much detail as he can recall. She strokes his beard, his jaw, his neck, his chest...soon, his eyes are closed as he speaks so that he can enjoy her touch in quiet darkness. It makes it feel louder.

“Have you told Kinvara about this meeting with him?” Dany asks.

“No. And I don’t plan to for a while yet. I have a feeling, once I do, I’ll be treated to a half-day’s worth of interrogation.”

“Without a doubt,” Dany agrees. “It’s a lot to think about.”

“Yes. And honestly, I don’t much care to think of it at all right now. I’d rather think about us. Our family.”

She agrees: he tastes that in her ardent kiss.

He’s quieter as he tells her all about the pyre. He tells her about the Lord of Light’s presence, his many faces. She admits what he’d already known: that when she’d gasped back to life and first saw him, she thought he was burning alive. You’re lucky this is all that happened to you, she tells him, kissing the skin over his heart. You only look sunburnt. He tells her it was a gift from the Lord of Light. They laugh. But they both know it was. A kind gift, too, Dany admits. For a moment, before I opened my eyes and saw you, when all I felt was the heat, my empty womb, and the eggs, I truly thought I’d gone back in time. To after Rhaego. But when I saw you, it all came back. Lyaella, the boat. I wasn’t scared then. I was happy.

He’s glad when it’s Dany’s turn to talk. He trails his fingertips lightly over her right palm, tracing the edges of her stitches, pressing periodic kisses above her wound. This doesn’t hurt, right? Jon asks. No, it feels good, she tells him. So he continues dragging his fingertips over her skin, going up her wrist, her forearm, down her chest, around Lyaella, over her stomach. As he does, she tells him all about Bloodraven, her voice calm. He hears about what Bloodraven had been doing to her all those nights in her head. He hears about the things he’d threatened to do—the things he’d made King Aerys do to Queen Rhaella, the things he’d wanted to make Jon do to Dany—and he is taken over by fear. He’d never known how close they came to destruction. He never knew the depth of the terror Dany had been living under for weeks on end. He had suspected, but it was very different to hear the brutal reality with his own ears.

She tells him about trapping Bloodraven in her mind. About how she could feel her life draining out of her. The realization she had, the choice she had to make. All while she was too weak to even tell him what she was doing or why. He reassures her that he had known anyway. Perhaps not the specifics, but he had understood.

“Were you frightened?” Jon asks her.

“Only that I would fail. But I was blessed: I had two people with me who loved me. Two people who protected me. No,” she says, correcting herself. She looks down at Lyaella, still fast asleep, her cheek pressed to the center of Dany’s chest. “Three.”

“And we had you.”

Sitting there with her, watching her smile down at their daughter, it’s perfectly clear to him why the
Lord of Light chose her. He has perfect faith.

XIV.

That evening, she insists on going for a walk before joining their small council in the Great Hall. Jon, having learned by now that Daenerys knows what Daenerys needs, defends her desires as the various maesters who journeyed over with Ser Davos protest.

“You’ve been dead for three days—”

“You bled out!”

“You need to regain your strength!”

Jon has no patience for it, and neither does Daenerys.

“Should I suddenly drop dead, bleed out, and faint again, King Jon will send for you straightaway,” Daenerys assures them firmly.

*My wife is a conqueror, he wants to tell them. She can handle it all. She knows what is good for her. She knows what is right.*

Had they seen her on that boat, they wouldn’t question her.

Jon tells them they’ll be back to the chambers shortly, wraps a supportive arm around Dany’s waist, and walks with her. They take it slowly, both because Dany is regaining her strength and because Lyaella is asleep in her arms, but Jon doesn’t care. He’d happily walk Dragonstone in a never-ending circle and never complain—as long as he is with Daenerys and Lyaella. And if he’s being honest, he’d rather walk Dragonstone in a never-ending circle than go face Sansa, Lord Tyrion, and Ser Davos.

“They’re going to have so many questions,” Jon says. The dragon curled around his neck gives a sudden, shrill shriek, and he flinches at the unexpected volume. He sees Dany hiding a smile.

“Especially about the dragons. And the fire. And the…well, they’re going to have questions about all of it.”

They haven’t spoken to anyone but Kinvara, Grey Worm, Arya, and the maesters since Daenerys returned to them. Jon isn’t sure he has the energy to recount their entire journey to anyone. Not yet. The wounds are still fresh, the pain still lurking just beneath his love-soaked heart.

“We don’t have to answer any questions we don’t feel like answering. And I think you’ll find they’ll do little but stare at us for a bit. We did rise naked from a pyre this morning.”

The dragon gives another shrill cry. Daenerys reaches up, gently nudging its chin with her finger.

“Oh, hush. You’re needier than Lyaella.”

He makes a sound that sounds suspiciously like a purr. When Jon glances to the side, he sees him (her?) nuzzling his face against Dany’s fingers.

“We could have left him,” Jon says. “Do you want me to go put him back with the others? Maybe he won’t wake them this time. Or ‘she’…honestly, Dany, when we’ve got a quiet moment, I’d like you to explain to me how dragon reproduction works.”

“I think you know well how it works by now. Every part of it, really.”
Jon looks down at her, heaving a fake sigh, and he’s pleased to see her already suppressing laughter at her own quip. He loves when she does that. He loves everything she does.

“Really,” he persists. “Is this dragon a boy or a girl?”

She shrugs. “What do you feel like it is?”

“A…boy.”

“Alright. Then it’s a boy.” She stumbles suddenly. Jon stops at once, his heart filling with ice. He gets a horrible flash of her stumbling in the corridor on the boat, blood flowing down her wrists, fluid from her womb trickling down her legs.

“Are you okay?”

“Yes,” she assures him. Her fingers press to her stomach. Suddenly, she laughs.

“What?”

She looks up at him, still smiling. “I’m hungry. Starving, really. Lightheaded with hunger.” That concept seems amazing to her. Jon can remember, in the first few days following his own resurrection, how surprised he’d been at his own body, at the ways it could pick right back up where it left off as if nothing had happened. “How long has it been since I’ve wanted to eat something? Since my biggest problem was something as simple as that? Hmm…I’m not sure: at least a moonturn, wouldn’t you say? Probably longer.”

Jon smiles softly. “You’re excited.”

“Yes. Very. I think I’ll ask for an entire chicken.”

His smile grows into a grin. “I can’t wait to see that.”

They continue on, though Jon keeps a careful eye on Daenerys, his arm tight around her waist the entire time.

“You do realize that dragon is yours, right?” Dany asks him, turning her gaze to the blood-red and stormy-grey beast around his neck. “It’s positively in love with you.”

Jon has. But he feigns protest. “You’re only saying that because this one is the most difficult.”

“Well, they all can’t be like Drogon,” she dismisses. There’s a pause. “I’m going to see him after our meal.”

“He’ll come along.” Jon says. She smiles and turns her face to the side, kissing his arm. “Do you want to go straight to the Great Hall? The meal may not be ready yet, but we can get you something else in the meantime.”

“No, let’s just walk for a bit. It feels good to be able to walk again.”

“Okay,” Jon agrees. Because it feels good to see her able to walk again, too.

They walk to Aegon’s Garden. When they arrive, Dany steps from Jon’s supportive grasp and walks slowly but steadily around the edges of the garden on her own. She peers at the wild roses, Lyaella clutched securely over her heart. Jon watches them, his heart a beast again—but a beast of a different nature. Fierce, powerful, all-consuming—yes. But this beast is driven by love, not grief. This beast of a heart leaves him warm from head to toe, and happier than any of their ancestors had
ever been. He’s sure of it.

She talks quietly to Lyalonna, showing her the roses and the trees. Jon hears her telling her about their history, her words blunt and factual. Matter-of-fact. Their princess will know exactly where and what she came from, the good and the bad.

Jon lets the baby dragon down to wander the garden, knowing he won’t go far. He watches to make sure he’s okay, and once he deems him safe exploring the bushes on his own, he walks over to join Dany and Lyalonna. They’ve stopped in front of a tall, damaged tree. He holds Dany to his side as she studies Longclaw’s wounds. Jon doesn’t say what caused it, and Dany doesn’t ask, but the truth of it lies between them anyway, sore and raw.

“Oh, look who’s waking,” Dany finally murmurs, breaking their silence. She and Jon peer down at Lyalonna’s grey eyes, everything else forgotten. Dany leans in and gently kisses Lyalonna’s nose. “Your father loves us, Lyalonna.”

Jon’s heart beats strangely in his chest at that, and his eyes burn.

“I do,” he says, gruff, overcome with it. “So much, Dany.”

He wishes he could go back in time and say it to her three times a day every day starting at the moment he first saw her. He intends on making up for the hoarded words of their past for the rest of their days.

“I know,” Daenerys assures him. She reaches out, her fingertips grazing the tree, and then she leans up to kiss him. As she does, Lyalonna makes a soft sound somewhere between a sigh and a coo, one so precious and new that Jon and Dany immediately break apart to look down at her. She yawns against Dany’s chest; it’s so tiny and precious that Jon’s affection surges wildly in his chest. Not for the first time, he catches himself thinking, as he gazes at her and her mother, that he would murder anyone who so much as made them cry, so intense is his love, his adoration.

He looks at Dany, who is already looking at him. The smile they share is lovesick. It’s powerful in its tenderness; strong in its softness. Unstoppable, he thinks. What in the world could overcome it?

They sit together on the bench Jon had last occupied with R’hllor. Jon holds Lyalonna for a few minutes. They’re quiet, peaceful; Jon presses his cheek to Lyalonna’s sweet silver curls and strokes her back. He keeps his eyes closed as he counts each flutter of her little heart. And all the while, Dany’s healing hand rests on his thigh: a warm, reassuring pressure. Every time Jon glances up at her, she’s watching either him or the baby dragon as it snuffles around the garden. Her eyes are always soft and brimming with starlight.

When Lyalonna gives a stuttering cry— a cry Jon has come to recognize as her hunger cry— he turns to Dany to suggest they go back inside. But she’s already undoing the ties at the front of her dress, and though Jon can’t understand why at that moment, the sight of it makes his eyes sting with tears.

Later, Lyalonna happy at her breast, he realizes what it was that moved him so: the oneness of them, mother and baby— how Daenerys knew what Lyalonna needed instantly, though she was cruelly ripped away from Lyalonna, though this is only her first real day with her. It was Dany loving and nurturing their child in ways Jon and Dany had never experienced themselves. It was birth and rebirth, the first dawn of spring. It was Aegon and Daenerys Targaryen sitting in their ancestral home, cultivating the life pressed to Dany’s heart. Planting a garden.

“You’re why I’m so hungry, you know,” Daenerys tells their daughter softly. Her fingertips dance over Lyalonna’s delicate curls. Her smile is the sun. “Your appetite is contagious.”
“She’s going to eat a whole chicken,” Jon adds, grinning at the thought.

Dany strokes the bottom of Lyaella’s tiny foot, her amused eyes turning to Jon. “Don’t underestimate me.”

“Never,” Jon swears.

And I will never underestimate myself again either, he thinks.

For just a second, he thinks he sees a flash of silver hair at the corner of Aegon’s Garden.

But when he turns, there’s nobody there.
The Garden

Chapter Notes

That's a wrap!

I'm hoping to write a sequel, but I'm still working on the specifics so I'm not sure when it will be posted. I'm trying to decide how I want to pace it (whether I want to focus on baby/toddler Lyaella and NewParents!Jonerys, jump to a time in the future with more baby Targs and VeteranParents!Jonerys, or timeline-jump chapter-to-chapter so I can show a little bit of everything). Feel free to weigh in!

Thanks to all of you who have read this, left kudos, recommended it to others, and/or commented! Writing this story helped me work through my post-S8 rage; I hope it brought some of you some comfort, too

I.

“Right,” Arya huffs, quickly snatching the snowy-white dragon by the tail as it attempts to make a death dive off her shoulder. “I regret freeing you both. I regret it deeply. Next time, you stay in the cradle.”

“Both of them?” Grey Worm asks. “No. This one is sweet.”

Arya glances over at him. As she eyes the blue-violet dragon snoozing in the cradle of his arms, she decides she picked the wrong one out to carry. Still, she thinks, better than the red and grey one. That one, last she saw, had been trying to curl up and nest in Jon’s hair, and its claws had drawn blood from his scalp. He and the queen had taken it to dinner with them to try and save the other three from listening to the way it screams whenever Jon leaves the room, but when Arya checked on the dragons left in the cradle, two of the remaining three were already awake. She didn’t want them to feel neglected or abandoned. After asking Daenerys if they could come to dinner, too, she was told if you want to hold them, sure. At the time, she’d been absolutely thrilled— of course she wanted to hold them. She couldn’t imagine a better way to eat a meal than with a baby dragon in her arms. But currently…

“Could you please stop?” Arya begs the white dragon. “Just sit nicely or I’m going to put you back in the cradle with the silver one.”

It had been attempting to leap from her shoulder again, but at that, its little face turns to Arya. She meets its gaze. Its eyes— black as obsidian at the edges, fading closer to deep amethyst near the pupils— bore into her. She feels abruptly guilty in the same quick, all-consuming way she feels guilty any time Lyaella cries when she changes her swaddling clothes.


She sets her hand on its scaled back and presses down very gently. The dragon complies with the pressure and sits atop her shoulder, its tail curling around the back of her neck for purchase. Arya pats its head like you might pat a puppy’s.
“Better,” she says. A second later, she feels sharp pain in her hand. “Ow! Bastard!”

Arya hears Jon’s voice.

“I’m not,” he says, feigned affront woven with his words, and both he and the queen laugh. Arya can tell just from the sound of their laughter that they’re in a wonderful mood. She pushes the white dragon from her shoulder, annoyed, and turns to face Jon and Daenerys as they enter the Great Hall. Besides Arya and Grey Worm, they’re the first to arrive.

“It bit me!” Arya complains, holding her finger up. The white dragon shoots over towards Daenerys, a snowy-blur across the stone floor, and Arya follows it. She stops in front of Daenerys and reaches for Lyaella, who’s cuddly and sweet in Daenerys’s arms (and certainly less likely to bite her.) “Let’s switch. I’d rather have Lyaella.”

“That doesn’t seem like a fair trade,” Daenerys muses, but she’s smiling. She gently passes Lyaella over to Arya. Arya takes her expertly: she cradles her delicate head in the crook of her right arm and holds her close to her chest, her entire body softening with love immediately. She loves Lyaella more than words can say, and she’s tried to tell her niece how much, but all she ever manages to do is blubber. She’s glad no one has ever been there to witness it.

She’s beyond shocked when Daenerys cradles the white demon as easily as she’d cradled sweet Lyaella. It nuzzles into her chest, twisting over so its belly is in the air, an image of relaxation. Daenerys strokes the rose-colored scales on its chest, and the dragon gives what sounds distinctly like a happy sigh.

“It bit me,” Arya repeats, unsure whether she should feel offended or challenged by the dragon’s conflicting behavior. “What did I do wrong?”

“Nothing,” Daenerys assures her. She strokes the dragon’s chin and thinks nothing of letting it gnaw on her finger. “He’s just playful, is all. He didn’t mean anything by it.”

It sure feels like he meant something by it: her finger still throbs. But he hadn’t drawn blood, and Daenerys had warned her before that taming baby dragons is a feat, so she can’t be too upset.

Still— she prefers this baby dragon.

“You’ve got a new dress,” she tells Lyaella, stepping away from the group and rocking her gently as they walk the length of the Great Hall. “It’s very nice. And you’ve got your mother back with you, too. That’s even better. Don’t you think so?”

Lyaella turns her face towards Arya’s chest, yawning into her jerkin. Her chubby fists open and close at her sides. And Arya is certain she would kill anyone who so much as looked at her the wrong way. She had previously thought she would leave King’s Landing once the baby was born, once the queen no longer needed as much protection, but she knows now that there’s no way she’s going far from this child. It’s just not happening. When Lyaella is in her arms, Arya feels home. She feels safe. Perhaps it’s because this child inspires a calm resolve like no other; Arya knows that things will be safe because she will make them safe. No matter what. Or maybe it’s just because she knows Lyaella loves her already— she prefers her arms to any next to Jon and Daenerys. With Lyaella (and Jon, and Daenerys), she has purpose, belonging. Family.

Maybe this time it will last. Maybe this time, she won’t lose it. Maybe she, Jon, and Daenerys can give Lyaella the calm, safe childhood they all lacked. Maybe (maybe) she can finally leave all the death and all the killing behind and focus on life.
“What do you think?” she whispers to Lyaella. The baby’s unfocused eyes rove over her face, stormy grey, Stark grey. “Do you think so?”

She lifts one of her fists up and rubs at her pink cheek. Arya smiles. She wonders, the thought searing through her veins, what Gendry will think of Lyaella when they return to King’s Landing. Will he find her as perfect as Arya does? Will he be sweet with her, gentle, kind? She thinks so. She believes it so much she can almost picture the way he’ll smile. And that thought does little to settle her heart.

She turns back towards the sound of Jon, Daenerys, and Grey Worm’s laughter. They’re still standing about, waiting for the rest of the small council, a dragon in each of their arms. The white one, Arya sees, is getting playful again; it’s chewing on the strings tying the front of Daenerys’s dress shut, and she’s so involved in her conversation with Jon and Grey Worm that she hardly notices he’s nearly severed the strings completely.

“Let’s rescue Mother,” Arya says to Lyaella.

She crosses back over to them and reaches out, poking the white dragon’s rosy stomach. It freezes, drops the strings from its mouth, and spins to look at her, affronted. But as soon as its eyes fall on Lyaella, it softens and twists in Daenerys’s arms so it’s looking curiously at the baby, the strings of Daenerys’s dress long forgotten.

Arya bends down just a bit, but she doesn’t bring Lyaella too close to the dragon. Her finger is still throbbing; there’s no way she’s going to risk little Lyaella getting bitten or scratched.

Yet her concerns appear to be unfounded; Jon approaches them, and before Arya can say a word, the red-and-gray dragon leaps from his shoulder to hers, promptly scaling down her arm to curl up atop Lyaella’s legs.

Arya’s alarmed protest dies in the back of her throat. The dragon slips to sleep nearly immediately, and Lyaella doesn’t even bat an eye. Arya looks up and meets Jon’s eyes.

“You should see how the blue one is with her,” Jon comments, glancing towards Grey Worm. The blue one is awake now, but it’s nuzzling Grey Worm’s hand gently as he strokes its scales, gentle and calm. “It wants so terribly to rest its face over Lyaella’s heart and nap with her. She’s a bit too tiny so we haven’t let it so far, but it loves her deeply. I think that’s the one Lyaella will bond with.”

_I think she’s going to bond with all of them_, Arya thinks, watching how peaceful and quiet the red-and-gray dragon looks with Lyaella. And when she looks back at Jon, that peace is mimicked in his own soft eyes. He smiles down at Lyaella with so much affection that Arya’s heart can’t help but swell at the sight. After all the trauma they’d been through, her brother’s contentment is one of the most beautiful things she’s ever seen. It makes her happier than almost anything else.

He doesn’t have to ask to take Lyaella; Arya reads the desire easily. She passes his daughter to him gently after pushing the red-and-gray dragon off her. He cups Lyaella’s head with one hand and her bottom with the other, bringing her to his chest. Her tiny cheek presses over his heart, and he holds her there, his own cheek rubbing against her silver curls as he sways with her.

“Here they come,” Arya hears Grey Worm say.

But Jon and Daenerys hardly care. Daenerys steps to Jon’s side, her arms looping around his waist, and she leans against his arm and looks up at him with a look so bursting with love Arya almost feels
guilty for viewing it. *Love that deep is a private thing,* she thinks, and she turns away. Or maybe she turns away because her eyes are burning at the sight. She’s so happy for them that it surprises her. She never knew someone could feel so happy for other people, but she does. With all her heart.

Arya has yet to see her sister since they arrived. They came right as they were preparing the pyre, and Arya’s mind was so ripped apart by grief that she couldn’t see anyone or anything but Daenerys. After what happened— Daenerys coming back to them, Jon rising relatively-unharmed from the flames— Arya hadn’t wanted to be anywhere but at the Targaryens’ sides. So she’s not sure what the rest of the small council thought of the miracle they witnessed. When they walk in, she decides they probably didn’t think much of *anything* about it: they still look so shell-shocked Arya doubts they’ve processed any of it.

“Good,” Jon says, catching sight of them. “Let’s eat. The queen and I are starving.”

Daenerys orders the doors shut so the dragons can roam around the Great Hall while they eat. She takes Lyaelia back into her arms, though how she plans to eat while cradling her, Arya’s not sure. Sansa and Lord Tyrion alternate between looking at Jon and Daenerys with shock and staring in wonder at the newborn dragons. Ser Davos, though, appears to be taking it all in stride. He walks up to Jon and sets a firm hand on his shoulder, his eyes full of relief. Of joy.

“You scared me senseless. Please, the next time you make plans to walk into a fire and walk back out relatively unharmed, share those plans with me ahead of time,” he requests.

Jon laughs. He pulls Ser Davos in for a hug, one Ser Davos returns at once.

“*Senseless,*” Ser Davos repeats firmly.

“I understand. Next time, I’ll warn you ahead of time,” Jon says. He pulls back enough to look at Ser Davos. His laughter gives way to seriousness. “Thank you for keeping Lyaelia safe.”

“Holding her is the furthest thing from a chore,” Ser Davos admits, and Arya couldn’t agree more.

When he steps towards the queen, Arya thinks he might be going over to ask to hold Lyaelia again. But that’s not what he does. They all watch as he slowly and painstakingly sinks to his creaky knees in front of Daenerys. The sound of his joints grinding makes Arya frown.

“Ser Davos, rise,” Daenerys says at once, as visibly concerned as Arya feels. “There is no need.” But that’s not what he does. They all watch as he slowly and painstakingly sinks to his creaky knees in front of Daenerys. The sound of his joints grinding makes Arya frown.

“Ser Davos, rise,” Daenerys says at once, as visibly concerned as Arya feels. “There is no need.”

But Ser Davos shakes his head. He reaches up, taking her hand gently in his. He must feel her sutures; his brow furrows for a moment, and then he turns her hand over in his, peering at her palm. Arya sees his throat work against rising tears. He holds her hand with a softer touch after seeing her wound. His eyes quickly grow hazy behind a film of tears, and Arya feels her own throat stitch closed.

“Your Grace,” he says, his voice tremulous. “I failed to keep you safe with my counsel. I ask you for your forgiveness.”

Immediately following those words, the only sounds are the dragons’ playful shrieks and hisses as they chase each other around the Great Hall. Daenerys turns to look at Jon; he walks over at once and takes Lyaelia from her arms, and as soon as she’s no longer in Daenerys’ embrace, Daenerys tightens her hold on Davos’s hand and lowers down so she’s kneeling, too.

“And I failed to properly consider your counsel, which was wise and of sound judgement. I ask you for *your* forgiveness.”
Ser Davos’s tears fill his eyes at once. Arya is reminded in that moment that he started out a poor little boy in Flea Bottom, crushed under the wheel like every other commoner. And now he’s kneeling with the queen of the Seven Kingdoms, a queen who has spent her entire reign thus far bettering Flea Bottom specifically. Arya hopes it makes him feel proud. Going by the way he looks at Daenerys—the way Ned Stark used to gaze at Arya—he does.

“May I embrace you, Your Grace?” he asks, but before he’s even finished, Daenerys has thrown her arms around his neck and moved in to hug him. He cups the back of her head, his tears slipping down his face. Daenerys hugs him tighter.

Ser Davos’s reaction seems to bust through Lord Tyrion’s shock. He crosses over to Daenerys, each step steadier than the last. As soon as Daenerys and Ser Davos break their hug, he holds a hand out to Daenerys. She accepts it, allowing him to provide a bit of support as she rises back to her feet.

“I’m sure you’re tired of questions,” Lord Tyrion tells her. His voice hitches in the back of his throat. “But…if you permit it…I would like to ask one of you right now. Just one. The rest can wait.”

“You could even ask two,” Daenerys permits. After a second, she gives him a small smile. Lord Tyrion smiles back, his eyes growing wet quickly.

“My first,” he says gruffly. He clears his throat. “Is Lord Bloodraven dead?”

“Yes,” Daenerys answers. Arya hears Ser Davos give an audible sigh of relief. “Question two, Lord Tyrion?”

Arya expects many different things. Questions about the prophecy he’d obsessed over for so long, questions about where Daenerys went when she died, questions about what happened in the pyre, but that’s not what he asks at all.

“Question two: how are you feeling? Tell us how we can help you.”

Daenerys tightens her hold on his hand. For a moment, Arya is certain something unspoken is being said, but she’s not sure what it is. Whatever it may be leaves both of them smiling, their eyes misty.

“I feel strong, Lord Tyrion. I truly feel better than I felt after my first birth, in every conceivable way. Once I get something to eat, I’ll be splendid…shall we sit?”

She directs her questioning gaze to Sansa. Arya looks over at her, too. She’s standing at Jon’s side, her eyes on Lyaella. She must feel Daenerys’s glance; she looks up, meeting the queen’s eyes. Arya watches very carefully, prepared to step in should Sansa say anything less than gracious or loving, but she doesn’t say anything at all. She merely nods softly and turns towards the nearest table. They wait as Daenerys and Jon sit, and then they take their seats. Arya sits on Daenerys’s other side, and Sansa sits on Jon’s. After they’re bought wine and juice, Sansa leans forward, meeting Daenerys’s eyes.

“Princess Lyaella is beautiful, Your Grace,” she says. Arya guesses she’s finally settled on something to say, and while it’s not as open-hearted as Ser Davos’s words, it’s the right thing for Sansa to say, anyway. Arya knows Daenerys is more proud of Lyaella than anything else, her defeat of Bloodraven and her resurrection included.

Like Arya knew she would, Daenerys smiles brightly at that.

“Thank you,” the queen responds genuinely. “Jon and I think so, too.” She lifts her glass, taking a sip. Arya can feel the thin, tentative thread joining her and Sansa. Their interaction is almost painful to watch: she can tell both want to speak to each other, but both are uncertain how to begin or what
to say. Uncertain what foot to start out on. Uncertain how to stretch that thread without breaking it.

“Tell me, Sansa, how are things in King’s Landing?” Daenerys finally asks.

Sansa smiles. Arya sees pride lurking at the edges of it. It seems that was the right thing for Daenerys to say, too.

“The rookery is being built as we speak. We decided to combine the library and the rookery into one structure; Lord Tyrion and I found, if we did that, we could save enough gold to begin working on an improved sanitation system in Flea Bottom.” Sansa looks hesitant for a brief moment. “Is that well with you, Your Grace?”

Sansa’s concerns are unnecessary: Daenerys is visibly pleased. She’s so intent on Sansa’s words that she hardly seems to notice the steaming food set on the table.

“What type of improvements?” she asks, looking from Sansa to Lord Tyrion to Ser Davos. Arya’s never seen anyone look so excited about sewage before. “Tell me more.”

Conversation blooms between the small council as they fill Daenerys and Jon in on the few changes they’d made thus far in their short absence. Jon passes Lyaella to Ser Davos at Ser Davos’s offer so that he and Daenerys can eat; they’re both visibly famished, and Arya’s so pleased to see them both eating that she almost forgets to eat her own food, too.

Once they’ve exhausted the topic of sanitation systems and sewer lines, Arya leans forward to catch Sansa’s eyes, her own burning question lurking at the forefront of her mind.

“How’s the temporary council?” Arya asks Sansa, working to keep her voice casual.

Her sister’s smile is knowing, but thankfully, she doesn’t tease Arya.

“They’re well. They’re keeping things contained until we return. Lord Gendry is waiting to journey back to Storm’s End until the Lord Commander of the Kingsguard returns.”

Arya scowls to hide how her heart has expanded within her chest. “I’m not the Lord Commander of the Kingsguard. I’m just Arya.”

“If you’re not, who is?” Sansa challenges. She looks at Grey Worm. “Grey Worm, wouldn’t you say Arya is the Commander of the Kingsguard?”

Grey Worm has been talking sweetly to Lyaella in Valyrian for the past couple of minutes, but he looks up quickly when he hears his name. Arya’s honestly just surprised Sansa knows his name at all.

“I do not know much of Westerosi Kingsguard roles,” he admits. He glances at Arya. He smiles. “But Arya is a warrior. The first warrior I’d trust Princess Lyaella’s safety to.”

As they look at each other, Arya’s thoughts slip back to the evacuation of that burning ship. She has never been so upset— never been so frightened— as she was that night. In many ways, it had been her and Grey Worm against everything. Jon was with them, but he wasn’t really. Daenerys was dead in Grey Worm’s arms. Thinking back now to their sideways run through the smoldering, tilting corridors, she wonders how they managed it. But they had. *Master of War*, Arya thinks, looking at Grey Worm. *Master of Protection*, she corrects. *Master of Loyalty. Master of Strength*. She smiles back at him.

“I’m no knight,” she finally tells Sansa.
“That doesn’t matter. I heard what all you’ve done. What all you did.”

Arya realizes it’s pride in her elder sister’s voice. She’s so surprised she can’t feel much beyond that startled thrill. The pride takes her aback, but not Sansa’s words: Sansa seems adamant for Arya to embrace a role, and really, she always has. At least this time it’s a role Arya would be proud to have, rather than Lady Arya.

Sansa turns to Jon, interrupting his conversation with Tyrion and Daenerys. “Jon. Who’s the Lord Commander of the Kingsguard?”

Jon falters. His brow furrows as he chews a bite of chicken. He looks at Daenerys.

“Arya?” he answers, right as Daenerys says: “Arya, of course,” as if it’s the most obvious thing in the world.

There’s a pause. Daenerys must see the way Arya’s heart skips a few beats.

“I should think it was obvious,” Daenerys says softly, surprised.

Arya is trying hard not to smile. “I can’t be. I’m not a knight.”

“That doesn’t matter. I’m the queen. You can be whatever you like. Unless…” something occurs to Daenerys; Arya sees her face fall a bit. She sets her bread back on her plate and twists in her seat, facing Arya fully. “Unless…you’re ready to leave King’s Landing?”

Jon turns to look at her, too. He looks as unhappy about the prospect as Daenerys does. As Arya feels.

“No,” she says at once, firmly. “I can’t go. I’d miss Princess Lyaella too much.” And you. And Jon.

“And what about this one?” Daenerys teases, hoisting the white dragon into the air between them. Arya looks down; she hadn’t noticed before, but all three dragons are playing at Daenerys and Jon’s feet.

“You can send that one North to be Lord of Winterfell,” Arya says dryly. Her finger throbs again. Seconds after she says the words, she glances at Sansa. “Have fun with that, Lady of Winterfell.”

“I’m not returning to Winterfell until Lord Tyrion and I finish our sanitation project,” Sansa answers. That surprises Arya, but not as much as Sansa’s apprehensive look towards the queen. “If that pleases Your Grace?”

“Yes, it does,” Daenerys answers graciously. She sees Sansa staring at the white dragon, still held up in the air. “You can touch him if you like. Go on.”

Sansa reaches across Jon and Daenerys, her hand cautiously outstretched towards the white dragon. Her fingers tremble. She seems too afraid to bridge the gap completely. Daenerys turns towards her, bringing the white dragon closer, and takes Sansa’s hand in hers, bringing it to the dragon’s scales.

“Nothing to be afraid of,” Daenerys says, letting go of Sansa’s hand as Sansa takes over petting the dragon’s scales. Arya and Daenerys watch her expression: her apprehension melts away to a look of curiosity.

“The scales are hot,” she says, surprised.

“Yes. Fire made flesh. And no, Arya, I think this one should live in your chambers when we get
back to King’s Landing.”

“Absolutely not,” Arya refutes at once, laughing. The queen is clearly joking, and Arya is happy to joke along with her. “Jon, tell her.”

“No,” Jon says to Arya. Daenerys shifts in her seat, pleased, and looks back at Jon with a smile. “You ought to cuddle with that dragon every night, that’s what I think.”

“Traitor,” Arya complains. When Jon laughs, Sansa joins in, and for a moment, they all laugh together, Starks and Targaryens.

“And what does Ghost think about them?” Sansa asks.

“He thinks they’re pesky little bird-lizards,” Jon answers. “But he likes them all right when they’re calm. Though if Ghost had his way, he’d spend all day napping with Dany and Lyella. I can’t say I blame him.”

“Aye,” Ser Davos agrees, still smiling. He hasn’t stopped smiling since Jon placed Lyella in his arms. He’s rocking her still, his food long forgotten, his eyes chained on her little face as she sleeps. “You brought a treasure into this world, Your Graces. I’ve never seen anything so precious in all my years.”

Arya’s so in love with Lyella that she doesn’t think he’s being sentimental at all. She loves the baby with the same wholehearted, unconditional devotion that’s currently shining in his eyes. Everyone does.

“I’m sure Queen Daenerys did most of the ‘bringing’,” Sansa comments. Tyrion laughs.

“No,” Daenerys says at once. She takes Jon’s hand atop the table. Arya’s momentarily proud of the stitches she’d put in Daenerys’s hands; they don’t pull at all as she clutches Jon’s hand tightly. “Jon was part of it. We did it together.”

For a moment, Jon, Daenerys, and Arya are quiet. Arya’s back on that boat, and she’s certain they are, too. She’s thinking about braiding Daenerys’s sweaty hair, about Daenerys’s legs folding beneath her, about her retching up nearly every sip of mint tea she tried to force down. How she’d cried out in pain as she birthed Lyella, how hard her entire body shook afterwards, the ruby-black pit that steadily widened on that bed. The smell of blood, so sharp and heavy that Arya smelled it for days afterwards. The memories are deeply traumatic to her, but when she looks at the king and queen, she’s startled to see that they’re smiling.

Tentatively, Sansa asks: “What happened? We were told…they said you died in childbirth, but then the priestess told us you…” she trails off, unable to get the words out.

“She said you killed yourself to kill Lord Bloodraven,” Ser Davos completes for her, his voice gruff.

“All are true.” Daenerys is matter-of-fact. She lifts the blue dragon up into her arms and cradles it. It makes a sound somewhere between a rumble and a purr, burrowing its snout underneath her arm and snuggling up to her chest. “If I hadn’t killed myself, I would have died moments after anyway. I had him in my head—I took him with me. And he wasn’t strong enough to come back as I did.”

Lord Tyrion’s voice is bursting with curiosity. “How did you kill him without him knowing what you were about to do? I was thinking we would have to do something like that; I was researching how we could trick Lord Bloodraven to go into a criminal right before execution, and then destroying him that way, but I never could figure out how to time it so that he wouldn’t know it was coming and escape. And I wondered, too…I thought maybe the Lord of Light would…well, I
thought, perhaps, Targaryens might be…” Lord Tyrion trails off. He looks embarrassed. “I admit my studies and theories got a bit wild near the end. I was so desperate to come up with answers.”

Arya doesn’t miss the quick look Jon and Daenerys share, but it appears as if the others do.

“I did the last thing he was expecting me to do: I did what he wanted,” Daenerys answers shortly. She readjusts the dragon when it begins kneading against her breast, shifting it so that it’s facing out. “I’m not quite ready to talk about it yet. I promise I will. I know you’ve got questions, and with all the work you did trying to solve it, you deserve answers. But I just need a bit more time. I’d like to just eat and laugh with you all. I’d like to talk about what’s to come, not what’s behind us.”

Arya is ready and willing to fight anyone who argues against that, but thankfully, everyone understands.

“Then that’s what we’ll do,” Ser Davos says firmly. He’s looking at Jon with an amused smile, and when Arya glances at her brother, she sees that red and gray dragon curled around his neck again. “You’ve got a shadow, Jon.”

Jon continues eating, indifferent to the baby dragon. The dragon, for his benefit, seems sleepy after playing so long; he tucks his snout against Jon’s neck and sighs, his eyes closing sleepily.

“We have many shadows. In fact, Dany,” he turns to Daenerys. “I should go check on the silver one.”

“She was still asleep when I was in there last,” Grey Worm says. “But that was some time ago.”

“I’ll go,” Tyrion offers. He sets his napkin down on the table. “You can finish your meal. I’d be happy to bring the baby dragon down here.”

“Thank you, Lord Tyrion,” Daenerys smiles. Arya has a feeling Tyrion will find out quickly that the baby dragons are as troublesome as they are adorable.

“Do they have names?” Sansa asks Daenerys. “Your dragon…the big one. He has a name, right?”

“Drogon,” Grey Worm supplies.

Sansa’s lips twitch. She looks at Daenerys. “Drogon? Like dragon?”

“He was named after my first husband, Drogo,” Daenerys explains. Sansa glances at Jon, almost like she’s wondering if Jon knew that, but Jon’s preoccupied with dragging the white dragon away from Daenerys’s plate.

“No,” he hisses sternly, “don’t be greedy, you’ve already eaten. That’s your mother’s food.”

Arya can’t help but smile at that. She hides her grin into her cup. Daenerys looks equally amused.

“They do need names,” Arya agrees with Sansa. “Have you two thought of any?”

The king and queen, both currently wrangling a dragon, look at each other and promptly laugh.

“Between Lyella and Jon’s quadruplets, we haven’t had time to think about much of anything,” Daenerys admits.

This sends the queen and king into their own side-conversation, one Arya listens to with amusement as she passively mulls dragon names.
“My quadruplets?” Jon demands. “They hatched on you.”

“You as good as birthed them. Now take this one, Father of Dragons, she’s hurting me.”

_Fyreheart? Snowfyre? Dark Sister!

“What about…Jenny?” Sansa suggests. She looks around at them. “No?”

“I like Jenny,” Grey Worm says. Arya’s not sure if he really does or if he just wants to support Sansa’s suggestion.

“Jenny is no name for a dragon,” Arya refutes. “Dark Sister. That’s a name for a dragon.”

Sansa’s nose crinkles. “Isn’t that a sword? Jon, isn’t Dark Sister a sword?”

Jon’s busy extracting the blue dragon from Dany’s arms. It’s clinging to the front of her dress and whining in protest.

“Oh, come now,” Jon says firmly to it. “This is pitiful. You’re a fearsome beast, act like it.”

“Yes, Sansa, Dark Sister is a sword,” Daenerys answers for Jon. She looks down at the claw marks on the front of her dress and sighs. “Honestly, what’s gotten into her?”

“I don’t know,” Jon says. He’s rocking the blue dragon like an infant, but she’s trying to get back to Daenerys. Only a second later, Lyaela gives a sniffing cry in Ser Davos’s arms. Arya looks at her in a panic (she always feels panicky when Lyaela cries), but she seems physically all right. She brings her fist to her mouth as her cries become shriller.

At once, Jon and Daenerys look at each other, realization drawing over their expressions.

“Oh,” they chorus.

Whatever they’ve realized is lost on Arya. The king and queen laugh together at some private realization, and then Daenerys stands. She takes Lyaela from Ser Davos, and the blue dragon settles the instant that Lyaela is in Daenerys’s arms.

“I’ll be back,” Daenerys tells them. She steps over to Jon and leans in, meeting his kiss. “Please come up with some names for your quadruplets, Your Grace.”

_Ours, Your Grace,” Jon shoots back. He strokes her cheek briefly, smiling, and then he reaches down and lifts Lyaela’s tiny foot, pressing a kiss to the bottom of it.

Right before Daenerys steps away, Jon reaches out, catching her wrist. She looks back at him.

“Will you go sit with Ghost?” he asks her quietly.

Arya’s embarrassed: she can tell the question wasn’t meant to be heard by anyone but Daenerys. She and Sansa share a sheepish look, but then Arya has to look away quickly out of fear she’ll laugh. There’s truly nothing funny about it…she knows Jon’s question stems from the trauma they went through, especially the trauma specifically surrounding Daenerys’s injury and subsequent death. Of course he doesn’t want Daenerys alone. But it’s so embarrassing to hear him sound so lovesick, and when Arya glances again at Sansa, she sees Sansa’s visibly uncomfortable, too.

“Yes,” Daenerys promises. She takes his hand gently. The way she strokes the back of his hand with her thumb is so tender that Arya fights the urge to make an excuse to leave the table. “Do you want to come with us?”
“I do,” he admits quietly.

Daenerys lowers her voice to a whisper. “But then who will stay here and name your quadruplets?”

At once, all of them begin laughing. Sansa and Arya are relieved the heavy moment was broken, and Jon’s eyes dance with genuine amusement. He rises from his chair to bridge the distance between him and the queen. He kisses her again, this time deeper and longer than a mere peck, shameless and uncaring to anyone’s presence. Sansa looks away, mortified.

“Oh, Jon says again, firmly. He sets a hand against the side of her neck. He strokes her throat. “Ghost.”

“Ghost,” she promises.

He nods his head towards her plate. “And you’ve still got…a leg, two thighs—”

The queen consumes his words with a smiling kiss. She tugs playfully on his hair when she pulls back.


“I’ll do my best,” Sansa says.

Grey Worm rises to escort Daenerys to wherever Ghost is, and Sansa turns to Jon, taking her task from the queen seriously.

“What about Daemon, Jon?”

“He’s got to keep his Targaryen names wide-open,” Arya quips. “With how lovesick he is, he and the queen will undoubtedly have many more heirs to name in the years to come.”

“If the queen wants to have more,” Sansa refutes. “I wouldn’t be surprised if she’s traumatized for life.”

“No,” Arya says, certain. “If anything, Jon’s the traumatized one.”

“I am sitting right here, you know,” Jon tells them.

“We know,” Arya and Sansa say.

Jon sighs, but he does a poor job hiding his amusement. Arya can read it easily on his face.

“I hope there are many more babes to come,” Ser Davos says happily. “As long as it’s safe for the queen, of course.”

“Let’s hold off on naming the future heirs of House Targaryen,” Jon says dryly. “At least until Daenerys is back to have input.”

“Jon’s right, we should focus,” Sansa agrees. “Meya? Luciya?”

Arya throws a few more out. “Rosewing? Silverflame?”

“You know what dragon had a great name?” Ser Davos comments. “Vhagar.”

“Yes,” Arya says at once. Her eyes have gone wide. “You could do Balerion, Vhagar, Meraxes,
and…Jon, what was the first dragon you rode called?"

"Rhaegal."

"And Rhaegal!"

"But those have already been used," Sansa argues.

"So? They’re classics. Like Visenya." Arya cuts her eyes at Jon.

"Let it go, Arya."

"I won’t," she sniffs, but she’s mainly teasing, and Jon knows it.

"Or," Jon suggests impatiently, “Blue, Silver, White, and Red."

Ser Davos, Sansa, and Arya stare at him. No one is humored.

"This isn’t a joke, Jon," Arya says firmly. “This is serious. Think about it. For the rest of time itself, children are going to read about King Jon, Queen Daenerys, Princess Lyaella, and their four dragons…” she makes her voice quiet and dull “…Blue. Silver. White. Red."

“I’ve got to agree with our sister,” Sansa says. “It happens so rarely, I know, but she’s got a point.”

Jon lifts his tankard of mead. “Okay, well, you two come up with some suitable names, then. I’m tired. It took me weeks to come up with Lyanna’s name.”

"It took you weeks to mash Lyanna and Rhaella together?" Sansa mutters beneath her breath, skeptical. Arya snorts into her cup of pomegranate juice.

Lord Tyrion returns then, doing his best to keep hold of the silver dragon. As soon as he sets it down, it bolts across the Great Hall towards the other three who are now in Jon’s lap. It moves so quickly it’s hardly more than a silver blur. *Like a shooting star,* Arya thinks. With a smile, Arya says: “Silverstar.”

“Perfect,” Jon agrees. He plops the silver dragon down on the table. “Silverstar.”

The dragon turns its head to the side curiously. It’s so cute that even Sansa grins.

“What are we doing?” Tyrion whispers to Sansa, retaking his seat beside her.

“Naming the dragons. Queen’s orders.”

“Oh,” Tyrion says, excited. “Let’s do the white one. Frostfire.”

“That was…immediate,” Arya comments. “Where’d that come from?”

“They’re wildflowers north of the Wall,” Jon says. “Do they look pink in your books, Lord Tyrion? They’re actually a deep red in person.”

“No, I know they’re scarlet. But something about the coloring of that dragon made me think of them. Maybe the pink against the white, like the scarlet flowers against snow. I don’t know, but I think it suits it. Frostfire.”

Arya likes it. It seems right for a dragon. Better than Jenny, anyway.
“Then I know what this one is,” Jon decides, setting the blue-violet one on the table with Silverstar and Frostfire. “Moonbloom.”

Delicate, violet flowers. Arya smiles.

“I like it,” she says. “Silverstar, Frostfire, Moonbloom. And the red one?”

Jon has an answer for this one, too. It’s so immediate that Arya wonders if he’s had it in mind for the red one all along.

“Storm,” he says definitively. To Arya’s surprise, the red and gray dragon perks up and looks at Jon as if he’s gone by that since he hatched.

“There, that wasn’t so bad,” Tyrion says. “Queen Daenerys will be pleased.”

Arya finishes her meal while Sansa, Tyrion, and Ser Davos get into a debate over which dragons are male and which are female. Arya chimes in only to point out it doesn’t strictly matter, but that does little to temper the discussion. They end up deciding that Moonbloom and Silverstar are female, and Frostfire and Storm male. Around the time that they reach that unjustified conclusion, Arya notices Jon’s silence. She looks over at him. He’s watching the doorway to the Great Hall, face serious and drawn, his remaining food entirely untouched. He hardly notices Storm nibbling on his hair.

“Go to her,” Arya suggests quietly, where only Jon can hear.

He seems to be fighting with his own anxiety. “I’m sure she’s fine.”

“I’m positive that she is. Still— go to her. I’ll watch over the dragons.” Gods, help me…

Jon looks at her. When she sees the depth of his anxiety in his gaze, she realizes he’s got a long way yet until he’s recovered from what they’ve been through.

“Thank you,” he tells her softly.

She reaches up and pries Storm from his shoulders. The dragon hisses, furious, but she drops it to the table and lets it rummage around her plate to appease it. Jon sets a momentary hand on her shoulder as he passes.

“Where’s His Grace going?” Ser Davos questions, concerned.

“To work on making a rider for Frostfire.”

It’s nothing more than a dry comment meant to deflect the true reason Jon left, but Ser Davos absorbs it suspiciously.

“Not yet he better not be,” he growls sternly. “That’s not safe for her at all.”

“She’s joking,” Sansa sighs. She gives Arya a sharp look. “And it was very crude of her.”

Arya sees Tyrion hiding laughter into his wine. She shrugs.

“Arya,” Tyrion says, after he’s done hiding his ‘crude’ laughter from Sansa. “You were there. On that boat.”

Arya waits. It’s not a question.

“What happened?” he begs. “I know Queen Daenerys and King Jon aren’t ready to talk about it,
which is their right, but—"

“I’m not ready to talk about it, either,” Arya interrupts. Residual horror seeps back into her at just that vague mention of it all. “It was…” she stops, her eyes burning hot immediately. “Awful.”

Sansa’s gaze is calculating. “You were there for every part of it,” she realizes. “You were even there when the baby was born, weren’t you?”

“Yes.” From the moment that sword severed Daenerys’s hands to the morning she’d spent restitching the wounds on her corpse. She had never left her side.

“That bad, then?” Ser Davos asks, noting her growing upset.

With a wave of resurgent nausea, Arya pictures Longclaw embedded in Daenerys’s hands. She squeezes her eyes shut, forcing the memory away.

“Worse.”

“Ah,” Lord Tyrion says, frowning. He glances towards the Great Hall doorway. “They seem to be doing fine, all things considered.”

“Only because they’re back together again; the relief of that outweighs everything else. It’s going to be a long time until we’re all fully over it.” Arya knows that for certain.

“Well, we’ve got time to heal,” Ser Davos says firmly. “And a world to rebuild. When His Grace and Her Grace return, we should find out when they’re planning on returning to King’s Landing, and we can make further plans based on that timeline then.”

“I think it would be best for us all to journey back together, rather than send another boat out from King’s Landing at another time to retrieve the king and queen. If we can convince Lord Gendry, Queen Yara, and Prince Quentyn to continue managing things on their own for just a bit longer—just until the queen is recovered enough to journey back—we can set sail then.”

They continue discussing the logistics of their eventual departure, but Arya’s too busy watching Sansa. She clearly thinks no one is paying her any mind: she’s hesitantly petting Silverstar, who’s curled on the seat Grey Worm vacated. Arya catches her smiling to herself.

“They’re not so bad after all, are they?” Arya asks her.

Sansa looks up quickly, her cheeks flushing of their own accord despite her attempts at smoothing her abashed expression.

“What?”

“Dragons.”

Sansa folds her hands atop the table nicely. She holds Arya’s gaze, her cheeks still pink.

“No,” she finally admits. “They’re not. They’re nothing like I thought they were.”

Arya smiles. She resists the words up until the moment she can’t any longer.

“Told you so,” she mutters into her goblet.

Sansa sighs. “Arya…could you be less…” she trails off, searching for the right word.
“Probably not.” She reaches out and catches Sansa’s hand right before Sansa pulls it off the table. “I’m glad, Sansa. I’m glad you’re here. And I hope you do stay in King’s Landing. With us. We’re all a family, you know. For better or for worse.”

“I am staying, but just for a bit,” Sansa warns her. “Not forever. We can’t just abandon Winterfell. That wouldn’t be right.”

“I know,” Arya nods. “Nothing is forever. But I’m grateful for any time that I get.”

She has already lost one sister, and even if that loss only lasted for three days, the thought of what could have been— what almost was— is petrifying. Arya is done losing siblings. She has lost plenty. And as long as her sister is here, as long as her sister is trying, Arya will protect that relationship.

Her sister squeezes her hand gently.

II.

Dragonstone during the day is severe, cold, no-nonsense.

The first time Sansa gets a good look at it— well after Daenerys rises from that pyre; everything before that is a hazy blur filled with Jon and Arya’s grief— she thinks yes, this makes sense. Suddenly, Daenerys’ indifference towards the harsh primitiveness of the Maidenvault is less errant and more fitting. It is certainly not in the style of the Lannisters of Casterly Rock, nor even the Starks of Winterfell, but as Sansa explores Dragonstone, Tyrion acting as guide, she finds it’s quite fitting for the Targaryens of Dragonstone. While Dragonstone is undoubtedly a feat of construction, impeccably formed and conceived, it is draconian and harsh. She understands very quickly that the vision she has for the future Red Keep will never do; Queen Daenerys and King Jon will never sit in a Throne Room overflowing with golden silks and thousands of fresh flowers. She finds she cares less and less as each day passes; the evolving state of Westeros is far different from anything she’s ever imagined…and far better, too. She’s getting used to all of it. Even Dragonstone.

But on the third day there, she learns that Dragonstone at night is something different.

After being unable to sleep, plagued by the stress-induced pain in her back that tends to flare and precede nightmares, she decides to venture towards the kitchens for tea. But she realizes quickly that navigating in the dark is much harder than navigating during the day. She gets lost quickly, and with how few people are on Dragonstone with them, she can’t find any soldiers or handmaids to redirect her. She stumbles through dark stone corridors for what feels like an eternity, growing more and more panicked with each wrong door she opens. She feels like she’s stepping through darkened doorways and ending up right back where she started, as if she’s stuck in some horrible, looping nightmare. Part of her half expects to find Ramsay or Joffrey or Cersei lurking behind a closed door. Finally, she opens a door and goes stumbling out into the moonlight, and though it’s very far from her chambers, she nearly falls to the ground in relief.

That relief fades to confusion. She’s in what she takes as a forest at first. She turns in a half circle, unsettled, frightened. But after blinking hard and allowing her eyes to adjust to the moonlight, she realizes it’s the garden. She closes her eyes and tries to orientate herself. She was here just yesterday with Lord Tyrion. What door did they take? She turns and studies the stone walls around the garden, but every door looks the same.

That relief fades to confusion. She’s in what she takes as a forest at first. She turns in a half circle, unsettled, frightened. But after blinking hard and allowing her eyes to adjust to the moonlight, she realizes it’s the garden. She closes her eyes and tries to orientate herself. She was here just yesterday with Lord Tyrion. What door did they take? She turns and studies the stone walls around the garden, but every door looks the same.

When she’s truly beginning to panic, she hears something soft and melodious drifting through the quiet night. She recognizes it as someone’s song being carried on the salty breeze. The sound is eerie from a distance, and it only serves to frighten her more. But then she hears a more familiar sound: soft cooing. *Princess Lyaella,* she thinks.
She focuses on that sound and follows it. It isn’t long until she spots a stone bench. She feels relief flood her at the sight of the person on it.

“Jon,” Sansa calls, relieved.

Jon looks up from Lyaella. His smile gradually slips from his face, replaced at once by a look of concern.

“Sansa. What’s wrong?” he asks.

She feels foolish and doesn’t want to admit she’s lost. “I…I couldn’t sleep. I needed fresh air.”

“Oh.”

There’s a pause; within it, Sansa feels months of awkwardness. Has he forgiven her yet? She’s unsure. She’s thinking up how to ask for direction back to her chambers without admitting she’s lost when he scoots to the right side of the bench, freeing the left.

“You can join me, if you’d like.”

She hesitates for a moment, and then she walks over and sits beside him. She peeks at his baby daughter; she and Moonbloom are curled together in a soft blanket, though Lyaella appears happy and wide-awake. She’s grabbing unsteadily at Moonbloom with chubby fists and tiny fingers, and Moonbloom nuzzles her cheek affectionately with every attempted grab.

“It’s late for Lyaella,” Sansa says. She’s curious as to why Jon’s out here with his daughter in the middle of the night. She knows why she’s out here, but she doubts their reasons are the same.

“Late for her? You’re joking. This is Lyaella’s favorite time,” Jon says. “She comes alive with the moon. Isn’t that right, Lyaella?”

Lyaella closes her fingers around Moonbloom’s tail and holds tight, looking up at her father with wide, stormy eyes. Her silver curls glow in the moonlight.

“Is Queen Daenerys sleeping?” Sansa asks. She places a finger on what is so odd about Jon and Lyaella being out here: Daenerys isn’t. She can’t recall ever seeing the queen parted from the princess—not since she rose from the flames, anyway.

“Yes, and I intend to let her for as long as possible. Lyaella likes to sit here under the stars anyway, and it gives Dany time to rest in peace.”

Last Sansa had heard, nobody in that wing of the castle had any peace thanks to the dragons, who shrieked together all night long.

“I take it you’ve trained the dragons to sleep through the night then?”

“I did no such thing: the Mother of Dragons did. Don’t ask me how. All I know is, they curl up together and sleep when the torches get extinguished, and that’s all I care about.”

“Seems like you two have enough to focus on at night,” Sansa says, her eyes traveling back to Lyaella. I do, too, she thinks. She feels the tension in her back return.

“Yes,” he agrees, but she can hear the smile in his voice. Lyaella truly is so precious that Sansa doubts her parents mind being up with her; they probably look forward to it. She feels his gaze settle on the profile of her face. “Why couldn’t you sleep?”
Her instinct is to lie. She comes up with plenty at once: *it's too humid, I couldn't get comfortable, I am worried about the journey back.* But when she answers, she speaks the truth.

“I have nightmares on and off. And my back hurts.” Somehow, the two are connected. Sansa is sure of it. The maester at Winterfell told her that the pain was related to the stress and the stress was related to the nightmares. Either way, it can be excruciating. “I was hoping to get tea in the kitchens, but…everything looks the same in the dark. I got lost.”

“I’ll walk you there when I go back in. Won’t be too long now,” Jon offers.

“Thank you, Your Grace,” Sansa says. It’s a bit stiff, a bit overly-polite, but she can’t take the words back once they’ve been said. And she wishes they hadn’t been: she realizes quickly that just that one statement has brought everything lurking between them to the surface, and she had hoped they could just go on as if it had never happened.

“I know Daenerys spoke with you back in King’s Landing, and I know she feels confident that you two reached an understanding. But you and I…I’d like to clear things with us.” He turns to face her, but Sansa can’t look at him. “You hurt me, Sansa. What you did— it was a betrayal. Telling Tyrion about my birth identity. Conspiring against my wife, the woman you *knew* I loved. Family doesn’t do that to family. You made me feel like Lady Catelyn always made me feel: unworthy of respect, worthless, cast out. I would have never done anything like that to you. I never would have sworn something to you— beneath the heart tree, Sansa— and then gone behind your back, no matter the secret. I never would have conspired against the person that you love. You broke my trust. What you did— it was unjust.”

Sansa looks at her hands. She pulls at one of her rings. She realizes she’s too ashamed to meet his eye.

“I’m sorry for what I did, Jon,” she says quietly. She is. “I won’t make excuses for it, but just know that it isn’t going to happen again.”

“Oh, I *know* it isn’t going to happen again,” Jon assures her, his voice as cold and harsh as Dragonstone itself. “See, I’ve seen what it’s like without Daenerys, and that won’t be happening ever again. Attacks on my wife or daughter’s safety will be treated with no mercy. It matters not who is the one leading the attack.”

Sansa turns her face and meets Jon’s eyes. In them, she sees only stormy resolve.

“I know,” Sansa assures him. “The queen told me as much, too. And I believe her.”

“Do you believe me?”

She eyes the hard line of his mouth, his set jaw.

“Yes,” she admits. “I do.”

“Good,” Jon says. He nods. “From now on, the things you’re unhappy with, you take them straight to Daenerys and me. You speak to us— face to face. No more conspiring behind our backs. No more manipulation. No more disrespect. Treat us like family and that’s what we’ll be.”

Sansa is still holding her breath. She feels as if she’s been holding it ever since she arrived at Castle Black, just waiting for the moment her safety unravels again. Just waiting for abuse at the turn of every corner. Never at Jon’s hands, but at the hands of those who might slip past him. And if Jon hates her, she’s on her own.
“Even though I hurt you? Even though I betrayed you?” she asks.

“Frankly, Sansa, my time and energy are too valuable to waste another second dwelling on petty past reasons. I know what really matters, and that’s not it. There’s no place in our new world for deceivers and betrayers—no place for Littlefingers or Varyses. That’s all over now. It’s in the past. And if you truly respect and care for me, I’ll see that respect and care in your actions, and all will be well. We will stand together, all of us. And we should be—we should all be together.” He shakes his head, his brow furrowing. His next words sound as if they’ve been repressed for a long while. “You shouldn’t be alone in Winterfell, Sansa. That’s not what Father would want. It’s not good for you to be alone. It’s not good for anyone.”

She feels her heart sink as it always does when someone brings up Winterfell. She feels torn between so many things, and Winterfell always seems to be the embodiment of them. Torn between the safety of her childhood and the uncertainty of adulthood. Torn between the wonderful memories and the terrible ones. Torn between her family and her duty. I am the Lady of Winterfell, she thinks, the thought threaded with sadness. I didn’t choose to be, but I am. It’s my duty.

“There must always be a Stark in Winterfell,” Sansa reminds Jon, her voice thin.

“There isn’t now, and I think we would know if something terrible was happening. All the things that happened to you there—”

“That’s why I can’t just run away. If I run away from Winterfell and abandon it, I’m letting Ramsay win. And that’s not right either, Jon.”

“Maybe not. But being alone certainly isn’t. Trust me. I was alone long enough to know.”

Sansa looks to the side towards the entangled rose bushes, their blood-red blooms hanging heavy at the end of each stem.

“You’re good at what you’re doing on the council, Sansa. Daenerys says it all the time. And you and Lord Tyrion—you work well together.”

She wants to tell him that this time spent in King’s Landing, puzzling out numbers and plans and moves, has been the safest she’s felt in a long time. She wants to tell him that Lord Tyrion’s partnership invigorates her mind like nothing has since she was a young girl plotting ways to end up on the Throne herself. She wants to tell him that the world his wife is building is a world she’d be proud to be part of. But the words just won’t come. Because when she looks at him, for a moment, she sees Ned Stark.

Conflict weighs on her chest, heavy and painful. But it’s been that way for some time now.

“I don’t know where I belong, Jon.”

It’s the most honest thing she’s said in a long time. She doesn’t tear her eyes away from the roses.

“Then you haven’t found it yet. You’ll know when you do.”

She wishes she had as much faith as he does. He sounds certain, confident. But Sansa stopped believing long ago.

She closes her eyes as the silence washes over them. The nighttime breeze is actually nice, and the salty, smoky air is less thick than it is in the daytime. Less overbearing.

“I don’t have all the answers,” Jon finally says. His voice is quieter after their shared silence. “In fact,
I’ve got very few, and the ones that I do have honestly just confuse me more. But I do know that everything works out in the end. You’ve just got to let it play out the way it’s meant to.”

Sansa forces herself to laugh. “Sounds like something a man who walked from a burning pyre might say.”

Thankfully, Jon laughs, too. “I guess so,” he agrees. “It’s difficult not to have faith after something like that.”

She thinks about telling him the Starks are short on magic, that maybe for Targaryens there’s some higher order to things, but the Starks had been left to the wolves. But that, she thinks, might only alienate him. He might feel as if she’s saying he isn’t a Stark. And he still is. He always has been.

“I don’t know what to say to help,” he admits sometime later. “I wish that I did.”

“I don’t think there’s anything for anyone to say,” Sansa admits. She looks up at him. “I’m just grateful to have my brother here. Even if I’m lost.”

He smiles. He twists his torso towards her, and a second later, he holds Lyaella out.

“Here,” he tells her. “Hold the princess. That makes everybody feel better.”

She’d doubt those words if she hadn’t seen it for herself. Ser Davos, in particular, looks like a man given the moon each time he cradles tiny Princess Lyaella. But Sansa has yet to hold her. She’s shared many meals and walks with Arya and Daenerys, but when Daenerys isn’t holding Lyaella, Arya is. And Sansa has been too afraid to ask, too afraid the trust is still too unsteady for them to stand on.

Now, though, it’s just her and her brother, and she knows he is genuine. He, like their father, is true to his word, perhaps to a fault at times. So she reaches out tentatively towards Lyaella, nervousness clenched around her heart. *What if she cries when I take her? What if she doesn’t like me?*

“She’s heavy,” Sansa says, surprised, still smiling. “She looks so tiny.”

“Not on babies. On Lyaella,” he corrects. “Rightly so, too: she’s half me. Isn’t that strange to think of? It is for me.”

It’s not so strange to Sansa. Lyaella’s eyes are Jon’s — she sees him clearly in her face, even as little as she is.

She holds her arms as if she’s cradling an imaginary infant like Jon instructed, and Jon leans in, gently settling Lyaella into her arms. At once, Sansa beams, though she’s not sure where the smile comes from.

“She’s heavy,” Sansa says, surprised, still smiling. “She looks so tiny.”

“She’s a glutton. Look how chubby her cheeks have gotten,” Jon says affectionately. He reaches forward and strokes Lyaella’s cheek; she turns towards his touch instinctively, and Moonbloom squirms out from beneath Lyaella’s blanket, nipping gently at Jon’s finger. He strokes the dragon’s cheek, too, and it makes a rumbling sound that vibrates through Sansa’s chest.
“She’s beautiful,” Sansa says needlessly. She shifts Lyaella’s weight very carefully so that she can reach up with her right hand and touch her pale hair. It’s as soft as it looks, each curl a delicate, downy silver wave. It reminds Sansa of moonlight on the ocean. She finds herself longing this—a child of her own—so deeply that the desire roots right into the muscle of her heart. “Was it very terrible? Her birth?”

She, Tyrion, and Ser Davos have been given bits and pieces of what happened over the past three days, enough that, if they wanted to, they could probably piece together the full story of what happened to Bloodraven and all the things that happened afterwards on Dragonstone. But one thing they had little on was Lyaella’s birth. They knew it killed Daenerys, though they were told it was much more complex than that, with the injury to her hands playing a large role in that. They knew she’d birthed Lyaella with only Jon and Arya there. But everything else was hazy. The king and queen tended to look at each other in silence any time someone asked about it, and when they finally looked back, whatever information they gave was guarded.

“Yes. And no,” Jon answers. “It was….I couldn’t explain it, Sansa. Terrifying. Magnificent. Desperately sad—desperately wonderful.”

Sansa’s mind flips back to a conversation she’d once had with Cersei.

“King Robert used to go hunting when all his children…or what he thought were his children, anyway…were born. He’d come back when it was all over,” she recalls.

“Then King Robert was a fool,” Jon says at once. “That’s not the kind of husband or father I’m going to be. Not the kind of king I’m going to be.”

Sansa thinks he’s proven that already.

Lyaella is so relaxed in Sansa’s arms that she appears close to sleep. Sansa hopes she will fall asleep; somehow, that would make her feel more trustworthy than she’s felt in a long time. It’s absurd to her how much power this tiny, fragile thing has—this little thing that can’t even lift her own head. But she holds an extraordinary amount of power; if she were to start shrieking in Sansa’s arms, Sansa is certain her feelings of self-worth would drop at least for the night.

She rocks her arms a bit, watching the way Lyaella’s eyes rove around with intelligent curiosity. She holds her dragon’s tail all the while, still snuggled up with it beneath the blanket, and Sansa can’t tell whether the baby radiates heat like the dragon or if the heat is coming solely from Moonbloom.

“She doesn’t get overheated? She feels hot,” Sansa comments.

“No. The heat doesn’t bother her, nor does it seem to raise her temperature. We think she likes it.”

“She must,” Sansa agrees, eyeing the way Lyaella and Moonbloom are cuddled up.

The princess doesn’t go to sleep, but she is calm and content, and that makes Sansa feel comforted. Jon is right: holding Lyaella is reassuring. She has a way of making everything seem simple. When she’s in Sansa’s arms, Sansa’s only worried about her feeling safe.

Sansa’s not sure how long they sit there. Around the time that her arms begin to ache and exhaustion sets in, Lyaella brings her hands to her mouth and squirms, and Moonbloom makes a pitiful whining sound. For a moment, it reminds Sansa of Lady as a pup.

Jon looks at Lyaella as if she’s just spoken outright to him in the Common Tongue. He rises.

“It’s time for Lyaella and me to go back inside.”
Sansa holds Lyella out to him and sits very still as he scoops her back into his arms. Once she’s safe in Jon’s embrace, Sansa stands, as well.

“I’ll follow. I can find my way back to my chambers once I get to the main staircase.” She hopes, anyway.

They’ve barely taken a step when Jon stops, a soft laugh falling from his lips. Sansa looks at him and then follows his gaze to see what he’s smiling at. Her eyes snag on the moonglow of the queen’s loose hair and Ghost’s snowy fur. Queen Daenerys and Ghost are walking towards them; it’s as if she’d gone looking for Jon and Lyella the same moment they stood to go back to her. She’s wrapped in a black dressing gown made of summer-weight silk, and Sansa averts her eyes, momentarily scandalized to see the queen in such casual, intimate wear as a dressing gown. But then again, she’d seen both her and Jon stark naked three days ago. She had learned quickly that the power the queen exudes has nothing at all to do with her wardrobe, yet a lifetime of reliance on propriety still has her averting her gaze politely now as Queen Daenerys reaches them.

“Hello, Sansa,” the queen greets.

“Hello, Your Grace,” Sansa greets, her eyes still averted. She hears the queen sigh. She glances over at her, and Daenerys arches an eyebrow, and Sansa backtracks. “Daenerys.”

She smiles, satisfied with Sansa’s correction.

“Couldn’t sleep?” she guesses. She walks over and leans against Jon’s arm, reaching to stroke Lyella’s little nose with her finger. Moonbloom gives a happy shriek at the sight of her.

“No,” Sansa admits. “Then I got…misplaced within the castle.”

“I suppose we should put more torches in the corridors,” Daenerys muses, smiling down at Lyella as Lyella’s little hand wraps around her finger.

“I was just coming back to our chambers,” Jon tells Daenerys. “Did you just wake?”

“Yes. And it frightened me to see you both gone without knowing where or when you’d gone. Don’t do that again.”

She sounds serious, and for a second, Sansa’s worried she’s about to witness a row. But Jon nudges her chin up so their eyes meet, his leaking such softness that no one in the world could possibly be angry with him.

“I meant to be back before you woke,” he admits. “I’m sorry.”

Something passes between them. Jon leans in, kissing the queen gently, and Sansa sees the way her body immediately relaxes. It’s as if all the tension in her muscles melts away completely, leaving her boneless and at ease. Secure—comforted.

Jealousy tries to swell within her—she feels the bitter sting of it—but she fights it back. They earned this, she thinks. You’ve got to earn your own. This is theirs. One day, you’ll have something different, but just as good.

And in order to get love like that, she’d have to learn to be okay with being vulnerable again, with trusting whole-heartedly. Standing there beneath the moonlight, just outside the glow of the Targaryens’ love, she thinks it might not be such an impossible feat. After all, what was truly impossible anymore? She’d seen a dead body rise from a burning pyre. She’d seen her brother—the boy she’d grown up with—walk into the flames and survive it. She’d seen four baby dragons. What
could still be outside of the realm of possibility?

“Walk with us,” Daenerys tells Sansa. “We’ll bring you to your chambers. I’ll have torches fitted between your chambers, the privy, and the kitchens tomorrow.”

“You don’t need to go to such trouble,” Sansa says at once, flooded with shame. “We’re leaving in four days anyway, right?”

They’d made tentative plans to all journey back to King’s Landing together, after receiving assurances from Lord Gendry, Prince Quentyn, and Queen Yara that things in King’s Landing would be manageable for a bit longer in their absence. It seemed silly for the queen to put torches up around the castle just for her when such little time remained here.

“Yes, but what if you want to journey here with us again one day?” Daenerys asks. “We’ll have the torches put up. It’s no trouble.”

Sansa is surprised that’s even a thought in the queen’s mind. As they walk back through Dragonstone, she feels peculiar. Proud? Touched? Honored?

*Important,* she realizes, as they reach her chambers. The most important person in Westeros— and Essos— maybe the Known World— has made her feel important.

She turns to look at Jon and Daenerys.

“Goodnight,” she says. She smiles at them.

“Goodnight. I hope you’re able to sleep. If not, I’m nearly always awake with this one,” Daenerys says, smoothing her fingers over Lyella’s hair. “Just come knock. But not loudly enough to wake the dragons!”

“I’ll keep that in mind. Anyway, it won’t be too long before Lord Tyrion is awake and seeking my counsel on one theory or another.” She can’t help but laugh at the thought of it. Every morning for the past number of weeks, it’d been something new, something exciting or ridiculous. “Right now, he’s got this theory that Targaryens *are* the Lord of Light.”

There’s a slight pause before Jon and Daenerys laugh.

“Funny,” Jon says. “That’s funny. I’ll see you in the Great Hall in the morning.”

When Sansa slips back into bed, she finds sleep easily.

III.

“Are you almost done now?”

Daenerys nudges Arya’s back with her knee. “Nearly, if you’d stop moving!”

Arya sighs heavily. It’s a bit exaggerated: it goes on and on far past the time a sigh normally should. But she falls still again, at least. Daenerys carefully finishes braiding that specific section and ties it off carefully, and then she lifts three of the six sections and begins weaving them together. Arya squirms.

“You’re more restless than Storm. And Frostfire!” Daenerys accuses.

“I am not…” Arya scoffs. “I just didn’t realize *this* is how long it takes.”
“You’re going to like it. Just be patient.”

“Fine…”

Daenerys shifts from sitting with her legs crossed to kneeling as she continues weaving Arya’s braids together. It’s slower work than she’d like due to the thin cloth bound around her palms to help protect her stitches and the deep aching she feels in her wounds any time she stretches her hand in a certain way-- though the pain salve Kinvara left for her helps immensely as long as she applies it every couple of hours. Despite her slower pace and slight pain, she manages all right. At the foot of the bed, Ghost watches them with his face on his paws, indifferent to Frostfire, Silverstar, and Storm crawling all over him. He’s scolded and snapped at them enough to teach them to stay away from his face, but he doesn’t seem to mind them playing around him as long as they respect that boundary.

As Daenerys lifts the fourth braid and begins weaving it into the other three, a quiet, melodious sound drifts their way from behind the closed balcony door. She smiles at once, her heart swelling so quickly it chokes her and causes tears to prickle her eyes. She clears her throat lightly and masters it, continuing on with Arya’s hair as the sound gets stronger.

“Is that…” Arya trails off curiously. “…Jon singing? No…”

Daenerys presses her lips together, trying to get her emotion under control so she can answer without sounding teary. She manages to swallow the tears lining her throat enough to say, with some modicum of composure, “Yes.”

“But it’s good!” Arya blurts. She tries to turn around to look at Daenerys, but Daenerys cries out, desperately gripping her hair so it doesn’t slip from her hands entirely, ruining all her progress thus far.

“No! Arya! Hold still!”

Arya freezes immediately. “Sorry. I forgot.” She looks forward again, allowing Daenerys to continue with her hair. She sounds thoughtful when she speaks next. “I never knew Jon could sing. Not well. I don’t think I’ve ever heard him sing before.”

“I doubt he knows we can hear him. He’s singing to Lyanna.”

They grow silent and listen to the muffled sound of Jon’s singing. Daenerys could listen to him sing forever and never tire of it; she feels a wave of contentment wash over her, one that makes her want to curl back on the feather pillows and close her eyes and just listen. His singing always has the same effect on Lyanna; Dany’s certain that Lyanna is dozing peacefully in Jon’s arms right now, cuddly and soft in sleep, her little hand closed around Moonbloom’s blue-violet tail. She sees it even without seeing it. Just the thought makes her heart ache with longing for the both of them, and that surprises her now as much as it always does. She loves Jon and Lyanna so much that she can hardly bear it to be parted from them for any length of time, and Jon is the same way. Ser Davos has already joked that the commonfolk will undoubtedly write some reprises to “Our Queen and King, Tied True” once they return. That claim was supported by Yara’s raven yesterday; she wrote that the entertainers in King’s Landing have already been performing a ‘dreadfully sad’ ballad entitled “The Wolf’s Cry” about Ghost’s night of mournful howling following Daenerys’s death. It’s apparently strangely accurate thematically, especially considering the entertainers only have rumors and speculation to build upon. Daenerys is certain that is one song she never wants to hear performed for her.

She finishes Arya’s hair and then nudges her towards the looking glass.

“Well?” Daenerys asks.
As Arya slips from the bed to go inspect her hair, Daenerys swipes Storm off Ghost’s neck and brings him into her lap. Silverstar and Frostfire quickly follow. Daenerys wraps her arms around all three and holds them as Arya inspects her hair in the looking glass. Daenerys sees her smile before she responds.

“I like it,” she says, pleased. “It’s fierce. I was expecting something fussy.”

“I know you better than that.”

“That’s true,” Arya agrees. She turns to the side and inspects her hair from that angle, reaching up to pat over the intertwined braids. Daenerys’s smile only grows.

“I could do it every day if you like,” she teases. “Jon’s been braiding mine, so I’ve got two free hands in the morning.”

Arya spins around to face her, squinting at her hair in disbelief. “He has not.”

“He has!”

“No way! There’s no way Jon did that!”

“He did so!” Daenerys insists. “He did it while I fed Lyaella this morning.”

“No way,” Arya maintains, shaking her head. She pounces carelessly onto the bed, jarring both Ghost and Daenerys up into the air. The dragons shriek furiously in Daenerys’s arms, startled and cross, and Daenerys feels the soreness between her legs flare up as she lands back on the mattress; she winces.

“Oh,” Arya says sharply, wincing alongside Daenerys. “I’m sorry…are you okay?”

She shifts, tucking her legs underneath her and searching for a comfortable position. When she finds it, she nods, the soreness ebbing quickly.

“I’m fine…but you didn’t apologize to Ghost.”

Arya rolls her eyes, but she’s suppressing laughter as she turns to Ghost. She bows at the waist. “I’m sorry, Your Grace.”

Ghost stares at her like she’s gone mad.

“Well, he got a better apology than I did…”

Arya turns towards Daenerys and bows again, this time so exaggerated that her face touches the mattress. “My apologies, Your Grace.”

“Better,” Daenerys approves. She inclines her head graciously. “You may rise, Lady Stark.”

Arya scowls at Lady Stark as Daenerys knew she would. She grabs one of Lyaella’s baby blankets off the foot of the bed and throws it at Daenerys. Ghost lifts his head at once and pins Arya with a hard stare, his ears flattening to his head.

“Oooh,” Daenerys laughs. She drops the dragons into her lap and reaches over, combing her fingers through Ghost’s thick fur. “Ghost didn’t like that. Not at all.”

She flings the blanket back at Arya, who catches it easily. Arya suppresses a grin and throws it right back at Daenerys, but Ghost lunges forward, snatching the blanket from the air with his teeth.
Daenerys looks at him, her eyebrows raised, impressed.

“Well,” Daenerys says, watching as Ghost lays his heavy head firmly on the blanket and grumbles. “That settles that.”

She and Arya succumb to peals of laughter that are closer to giggles than anything else. Once Daenerys starts laughing, she has a difficult time stopping, and Arya suffers a similar problem. When Jon finally steps back into the room, Moonbloom shrieking Lyaella’s hunger for the world to hear, they’re still taken with giggles. He stops, his eyebrows rising.

“I can’t have sounded that bad,” he says dryly, and that only makes them laugh harder. Daenerys wraps her arms around her middle, laughing so hard her stomach burns from the force of it. She’s unable to get any words out; she wants to say: *no, you singing to Lyaella is the most beautiful sound in the entire world,* but she doesn’t have the breath needed to squeeze those words in between each giggle. She reaches out to him instead, beckoning him to her.

“No,” Arya finally manages, her eyes streaming from laughter. “It’s Ghost.”

Jon looks at Ghost, who looks innocently back at him, his face still chaining the baby blanket to the mattress. Jon crosses the room and sits beside Dany on the bed, taking her offered hand. She holds it tightly, breathing carefully to try and stop her laughter, but then Arya is set off again, and she follows quickly. She leans into Jon, hiding her laughter against his neck, and soon, she hears him chuckling along with them. He strokes her back, her neck, her hair, his lips pressing to the side of her face every few seconds.

“What— did Ghost stand up on his hind legs and juggle?” he murmurs into her hair.

And, of course, that mental image only makes Dany laugh harder. She reaches up and grasps Jon’s face, bringing his lips to hers. Soon, the warmth of his kiss turns her laughter to a steady smile. When she breaks their kiss— thanks to Moonbloom’s impatient nudging at her rib— she wipes tears from the corners of her eyes and reaches for her daughter, still beaming.

“All right,” Arya says, out of breath, laughter still clinging to the edge of each word. “I’m going to go. Grey Worm and I are going to shoot spears out of the sky.”

Jon laughs, bemused. “With *arrows*?”

“Yes. He says he can hit twenty in a row without missing any. We’ll see.”

“Well, do keep us updated on that,” Daenerys requests. She smiles down at Lyaella; her daughter is watching her face, her storm-cloud eyes wide and sweet. Dany gently pulls Lyaella's hand from her mouth and kisses her tiny knuckles.

“I’ll draft a report for you, Your Graces, and deliver it posthaste,” Arya says, her voice ringing with feigned formality.

“Goodbye, Arya,” Jon snorts.

“I’m dismissed, Your Grace?”

“Goodbye.”

“Goodbye,” she says back, her smile audible in her voice.

The door clicks shut after her. Dany edges back on the bed until she’s leaning against the pillows,
Lyaella still cradled in her arms, and then she sets about undoing her dress. It becomes much more difficult than it needs to be: Moonbloom squirms out of Lyaella’s blanket and nuzzles against her hands repeatedly, causing her hands to slip from her dress clasps over and over again.

“Well how am I meant to nurse her if you won’t let me undo my dress, you silly thing?” Daenerys murmurs to Moonbloom. She’s torn between amusement and frustration as Moonbloom does the same thing again. “Moonbloom—stop it. Jon, can you—oh, yes. Thank you.”

He lifts Moonbloom up before she even finishes asking. Moonbloom, of course, begins shrieking in protest, but Jon holds her firmly until Daenerys undoes her dress and pulled it down to puddle at her waist. A chill overtakes her as soon as her skin is exposed. She shivers. Once Lyaella is latched at her left breast, Moonbloom relaxes in Jon’s hands.

“You’re absurd,” he tells the blue dragon. “She’s not starving to death if she goes two hours without eating. Are you trying to fatten her up so you can eat her?”

He tickles Moonbloom’s stomach, and Moonbloom’s wings extend and flap at her sides as if she’s trying to take flight, happy shrieks filling the air. Dany bites back a grin at how cute it is.

“Dramatic. That’s what you are,” Jon adds, giving Moonbloom a final pet on the snout. He plops her down onto the bed. “Go play.”

She looks over at the three other dragons rolling around and blowing smoke at each other at the opposite end of the bed, and then she looks back at Lyaella.

“Go,” Jon repeats firmly.

Moonbloom grumbles, but she bats her wings hard and manages to soar across the bed, landing beside the other dragons. Other than Storm, she’s the best so far at flying, though Frostfire has already produced small flames twice now.

Daenerys is still cold, but she doesn’t want to disturb Lyaella by shifting her to reach for something to cover her shoulders. She ignores the cool breeze prickling her skin and smiles down at Lyaella. She’s stroking her daughter’s hair when she feels the soft weight of a blanket settle over her shoulders. Her smile grows. She doesn’t have to look up.

“Thank you,” she tells Jon.

The mattress shifts as he moves to sit beside her. Daenerys feels as if they’ve spent their entire time on Dragonstone in this bed, and yet, she’s in no hurry to leave it. This is where they’re a family; not the rulers of the Seven Kingdoms, not the Lord of Light’s prophets, not the Princess or Prince Who Was Promised. Just Jon, Dany, and baby Lyaella. It’s home.

She gazes at her daughter, the most brilliant light of her life. Was I ever content like this when I was a baby? Dany wonders sometimes. Did I ever trust and need someone so much? Did I ever feel so safe? So protected? It saddens her sometimes, but she knows the answer to all those questions must be no. She hopes with all her heart that these moments of pure love and trust will be the foundation for Lyaella’s entire world; she wants her daughter to grow with a heart so open, so unmarred by loss and betrayal, that she loves and is loved by everyone she meets. Then she will be safe far past the time her parents are no longer here to protect her.

A wave of drowsiness washes over her as her milk lets down. She rests her head against the headboard and closes her eyes as Lyaella nurses, as wholly relaxed and content as Lyaella is. Leaning back causes the blanket to slip from her shoulders, but Jon grasps it and readjusts it, chasing
the cool air from her bared skin. He brushes a few errant strands of hair off her forehead afterwards, his touch gentle as he tucks them behind her ear. She shifts Lyælla’s weight enough to reach up and stroke the back of his hand, as touched by his *thereness* as she always is. If there were ever a king—a husband—as supportive to his queen as Jon is to her, as involved, Dany’s never learned of him. For every abuse their ancestors heaped onto their ancestresses, Jon heaves only devotion her way. He makes her feel, fully and without any doubt, that they are equals in this as they are in everything else. *We will do it together,* she hears her own voice echo, from so long ago now…and how right she was. They *have* done it all together. She will never be alone ever again.

She brings his hand to her lips and kisses the back of it. She has so much love flowing through that she feels as if that’s all she is, like she’s comprised of love and love alone. Like love twines though her blood where she once thought fire did. *Or perhaps they’re one and the same,* she thinks.

“They’ve begun loading the ship. I was watching with Lyælla on the balcony,” Jon tells her.

Dany never imagined she’d feel dread at those words. It’s not going back to King’s Landing that has her stomach in knots—it’s the journey itself. It’s getting back on a boat. Were she healed enough from the birth to ride Drogon back to King’s Landing, she would have flown all the way there, Lyælla bundled at her chest and Jon behind her.

“I should be excited,” she comments. She fights against her urge to doze and forces her eyes back open, her gaze returning to her baby. Her fingertips ghost absently over Lyælla’s long, delicate eyelashes, and her affection surges so powerfully within her that she nearly gets choked up from the intensity of it. That affection only grows when Lyælla snuggles closer to her. Her little hand moves to rest over Dany’s dagger wound. Dany worries the stitches will scratch Lyælla’s palm, but when she reaches down to move Lyælla’s hand a little to the right, Lyælla moves it back where it was only a few seconds later. Dany doesn’t know what she likes about that spot, but she lets Lyælla’s hand stay there after that. The soft warmth of her baby’s hand over that wound makes Dany so thankful for the dagger, for Jon, for Arya, for herself. She’d take a thousand knives to the heart a thousand times for this little person in her arms, for this little hand covering her heart, for this new life at her breast. Anything to keep her safe. Anything.

“You’re not excited,” Jon realizes, bringing her focus back to their conversation about their departure. It’s not a question: he can tell.

“Not as much as I want to be.”

Jon reaches over, gently taking Lyælla’s hand in his, lifting it from the dagger wound. Her small hand closes around his thumb at once, holding tight to her father. Sometimes she holds his hand like this for the entire nursing session, a vision of sweetness so pure and gentle it once moved Jon to tears. Which had, of course, moved Dany to tears. Dany’s convinced they’ve done more crying the past week than either have done their entire lives, but she doesn’t lament it: for once, they’re crying for good reasons, for love so fierce it must be expressed, for the relief of finally having found what they’ve been searching for all their lives.

Jon’s hand rests against the wound Lyælla had just been touching, and he leans over, kissing Lyælla’s tiny fingers. Then, he turns his face and presses his lips to one of the other, shallower cuts on Dany’s chest. She feels like her heart is yanked right up against that wound. His kiss is gentle, and afterwards, he trails his nose to the next wound and kisses that one, too. Dany’s heart thurms faster in her chest, her emotion swelling within her. He hasn’t said a word, but he has: Dany understands from his kisses that he’s as nervous about getting back on a boat as she is. That the trauma, for him, is very much a living thing to contend with. That the emotional wounds they obtained, like these marks from the dagger, are not yet fully healed.
“It won’t be anything like last time,” he reassures her, but his voice is rough, and Dany feels as if he’s trying to convince himself as much as her.

“I know. Yet I am still afraid,” she admits.

He leans in and kisses her neck.

“I am, too,” he says, his breath warm against her skin. He lifts his face and meets her eyes. “Would you like to stay longer? If you do, Dany, I’ll go talk to Ser Davos and Lord Tyrion right now. It won’t be a problem. We can stay as long as you need—I just want you to be happy. Safe.” His voice breaks on the last word, giving away the true depth of his concern.

“I am happy. I am safe,” Dany tells him. It’s the first time in her life both those things are simultaneously true.

“I worry for you,” he admits.

She frowns. She reaches up and sets a hand against his cheek. “I know you do.”

“I don’t think I’ll ever stop,” he admits. His eyes look heavy, like storm clouds right before a downpour.

“That’s alright. I won’t ever stop worrying for you, either. We’ll just worry together.”

They’ll have many burdens to shoulder together throughout their life; this is just one of them.

She fights her drowsiness, wenching her eyes open every couple of minutes as they threaten to shut of their own accord. She tries to stay away by gazing down at Lyaella, but the sight of her sleepy, relaxed baby only makes her more tired. Lyaella’s slow, rhythmic swallowing is gentle white noise more soothing than the sound of the ocean, or wind fluttering through leaves— or Dany’s just been conditioned to view it as such.

“Sleep,” Jon suggests, his hand brushing her cheek. “I’m here. I won’t let you drop her. I’ve got seven ravens here to read; I’m not going anywhere.”

She trusts him with all her heart; accepting that offer is easy to do. She dozes freely, stirring once when Jon wedges a pillow underneath her arms to help support Lyaella, and again when it’s time to switch her to her other breast. Lyaella falls asleep at that side near the end of the feed, her little chest rising and falling steadily with each deep, relaxed breath. Dany peers at her with a tired smile, her heart soaked through with love. For a time, all she can think about is how grateful she is that moments like these are what she’ll remember when she thinks of Dragonstone. She may have acquired a lifelong distaste for boats, but at least some good could happen here. At least her trauma won’t bed down in the corridors for the rest of her life, won’t chase her through the castle each time she steps into it. She’ll be able to come back to Dragonstone; she’s sure of it.

She turns her gaze to Jon. He’s bowed over an array of letters in his lap, and his left arm is stretched at an odd angle: he hasn’t pulled his hand from Lyaella’s grip yet and clearly doesn’t intend to, despite how uncomfortable his position appears. *This quiet week with Lyaella is not the only good thing that’s happened here,* Dany acknowledges, her heart sopped with tenderness. Here is where she met him. Where they found each other.

She rests against the pillows and cradles their sleeping daughter as her drowsiness gradually ebbs away. She watches Jon as he studies each raven with a dark, furrowed brow. She can tell which letters contain frustrating news by the way he reaches up and rubs the scar over his left eye. And she can tell which ones will be celebrated: those bring a soft smile to his equally-soft lips, one Dany
aches to kiss.

He’s got that soft smile in place now as he rifles through a thick stack of papers. The multiple pages of parchment were bound together by twine before Jon untied it, indicating it all came from the same sender. Daenerys briefly pities the raven tasked with carrying it all this way.

“Who wrote that?” she asks curiously. Lord Gendry, Queen Yara, and Prince Quentyn are typically brief in their ravens; she can’t imagine who would be sending such a long letter.

He looks over at her. “Let’s trade off,” he says, still smiling. “They’re for you. I think you should read them.”

He gently pulls his thumb from Lyælla’s sleeping grasp so he can take her from Dany. Dany turns towards him and waits as he slowly and carefully scoops Lyælla from her arms, careful not to disturb her sleep enough to upset her. Dany pulls the sleeves of her dress back up and refastens the clasps, her mind whirling the entire time.

“For me? From whom?”

He sets the stack onto her thighs. “Our people.”

Dany feels a deep tug to her heart. She looks up at Jon, surprised, her hand falling atop the stack of letters.

“But the rookery’s not…?”

“Not yet. But Ser Davos arranged letter-writing lessons before he left, and the maesters from the Citadel are training the ones we chose to run the new rookery using the existing rookery. They sent the letters from the lessons off as practice.”

Dany touches the topmost letter. Her heart has made a home in her throat, and because of that, it takes her a minute to speak.

“They were told to write to us during these lessons?”

She hears his smile. “No. They were told to write to whoever they wanted, wherever they wanted. Those just chose you.”

The mere notion that the people of Flea Bottom are writing letters is enough to move her, but when she lifts the first letter up and finds it was written by a child, she’s deeply affected. She traces her fingers over the unsteady, childish writing, a laugh bubbling up her throat at the innocent words written. Dear Queen Daenerys, the child wrote, I heard you left to have your baby. I hope it is a girl like me and you name her Alysanne. My mother says having babies hurts terribly. I think it cannot be that bad or else nobody would do it anymore, so I wouldn’t worry if I were you. But in case you are worried, I have a book I read every time I am scared, it goes like this, once there was maiden from the Vale who…

Daenerys reads all the children’s letters first, sitting straight up now, enthralled by every clumsy word. Quite a few letters are from women expecting babies at the same time as her, wishing her good fortune and safety, some modestly providing advice from previous births. An old man sent one of his songs to her, a young boy wrote musings on the possibilities of teaching dragons to speak, and one child sent Daenerys a charcoal drawing of Drogon that likens Daenerys’s poor child to a lumpy, misshapen horse with wings.

She’s laughing when she finishes, entombed in happiness and pride. Jon’s fingers touch gently
beneath her eyes, brushing away tears that have just begun falling. Twice she’s cried this morning thus far, and both times from joy she never imagined she’d ever get to feel.

“I’m still not sure I deserve it,” she admits. All of it: her people’s love, these letters, this joy.

“I am.”

As he kisses her, the four dragons abandon their playtime and alternate between half-flying and pouncing towards them. They clamber over them as soon as they reach them, Storm scaling Jon’s arm, Frostfire burrowing into Daenerys’s skirts, Silverstar nesting in her lap. Moonbloom curls on Jon’s chest beside Lyaella, her tail curling around the baby protectively.

“Needy, jealous little things,” Daenerys murmurs against Jon’s lips. “It wasn’t this bad with Viserion, Rhaegal, and Drogon, but they also never had to share me with anyone but each other.”

“Do you think they’re going to do okay in King’s Landing? Tyrion told me dragons thrive best here on Dragonstone. And you told me before about the sickly ones…the ones that didn’t grow right in King’s Landing, the ones who died.”

He’s petting Storm’s scales, but it’s Moonbloom he’s gazing at. She’s certain he knows what she does: that losing Moonbloom would be horrific for Lyaella, even this early on in life.

“They’ll do fine,” she reassures him. “My first dragons certainly grew despite being far from here. We won’t lock them away or chain them up as our ancestors did, but we will restore the Dragonpit to give them a suitable, safe place to rest when they choose it. It will be better than it was. I’ve already spoken to Lord Tyrion and Sansa about rushing its repair. Once we clear some ruins, we can expand it so it covers nearly all of Rhaenys’s Hill. Of course, that means the Red Keep’s repairs will be postponed again.”

“Bet they were thrilled about that,” Jon says flatly.


“No,” Jon answers. His arm goes around her as she curls at his side, her cheek pressing against his chest. She watches their daughter snooze over his heart, Moonbloom breathing in sync with her. “I can’t think of anything better than our crowded chambers. And I don’t want Lyaella away from us, anyway. She doesn’t need her own chambers. Not yet.”

“Not for a while yet,” Daenerys agrees, her heart inching down just at the thought of their tiny baby being separated from them. She looks up at Jon. “When we do repair it, I think I’d like to call it something different.”

Her eyes flutter shut as his hand strokes the length of her spine. She feels the warmth of his lips against the crown of her head moments later.

“Anything specific in mind?”

“Yes,” she admits. She hugs his arm to her, pressing her face into his tunic, overcome with love. “The Garden.”

His soft smile is audible. “And what do you envision the Garden will look like?”

Daenerys looks up at Jon. She smiles as she strokes his chin. Her thumb brushes over his lips afterwards, and her heart pangs with a desire to kiss him. She listens to her heart. After burying a dagger into it, she thinks it deserves as much warmth as it craves, and pressing her lips to Jon’s soft
ones is warmer than anything else in the world. Warmer than the fire they climbed out of, warmer than the heat of Moonbloom and Lyaella against her chest. His was the first warmth, the warmth that had sparked every other flame. She could, and would, kiss him forever.

“Do you have any ideas?” she finally whispers, their lips barely parted. She doesn’t care to move too far away; she’s certain she’s going to kiss him again, and she does, only seconds later.

“Mmm,” he hums into their kiss, both with approval at the way her hands have gone into his hair and to show he’s thinking. “Should it be red again?”

Daenerys smiles. Aegon the Conqueror had built the Red Keep with red rock to symbolize his conquest by fire. It had been a warning, a reminder. A threat.

But she needs no fear. She’s got more love than she knows what to do with, both here in this bed with the last of the Targaryens and in the hearts of her people.

“No,” she murmurs, kissing Jon again. “Only the doors.”

IV.

Tyrion, Red Fly, and Grey Worm are watching Arya and Sansa argue over a baby blanket. The absurdity of it pairs well with the light, bubbly wine in their goblets, and their casual game of Cyvasse.

“Maybe if you’d paid any attention during your sewing lessons—”

“Have you seen Queen Daenerys’s hands?! That stitchwork is better than anything you’ve ever seen! Anything! Daenerys, show Sansa your hands, show her my stitches—”

“Stitching skin is very different from stitching combed linen, and had you been patient and just let me do it—”

“There is nothing wrong with my repair! Do you think Princess Lyaella cares about crooked stitches?! No! Moonbloom’s only going to rip it again with her claws—”

“That’s quite enough.” The queen’s voice is firm; both Sansa and Arya huff and look away from each other, each glaring out towards the churning sea. “Why are we arguing about Lyaella’s blanket? It’s mended. Thank you, Arya.”

“I truly think they’re arguing just to argue,” Lord Tyrion pipes up. “We’re all a bit bored.”

Red Fly grunts in agreement to his left.

“Sansa critiqued my stitches—”

“I was only trying to help—”

“Seven hells, it’s like I’m fourteen again,” Jon mutters. He carefully sets the shallow basin of water he’d left to fetch on a wooden table bolted to the deck. Daenerys carries Lyaella and her ‘ruined’ blanket over to it. She unwinds the blanket from the baby and holds her up as Jon removes her soiled layers.

“Ah,” Tyrion comments airily, lifting his wine up to greet the sea breeze. “Nothing like the smell of baby shit in the morning.”

“That is the princess,” Grey Worm says, glowering at Tyrion.
“And yet, it’s still shit,” Tyrion shrugs. Though truthfully, he smells little beyond the sea-breeze.

“Her shit smells loads better than you smell,” Red Fly mutters, pushing his jade dragon across the game board. “At least the princess is bathed more often than every other fortnight.” Grey Worm sighs and relinquishes an ivory elephant.

“Brave words from a man who is about to lose his twenty-fifth consecutive match,” Tyrion drawls, sipping from his goblet. “Would you like my help?”

Red Fly twists on the stool and holds his arm out, attempting to shield the board so Tyrion can’t see the pieces. “No. And how am I losing? I’m winning!”


Red Fly scowls. “You and your Lady Sansa have something in common, Lord Tyrion.”

Tyrion lifts his brow. “Oh? Impeccable tastes? Superb reasoning?”

“You think you know better than everyone else.”

“Well,” Tyrion comments, his eyes seeking Sansa’s bright hair. She’s sitting on a bench a couple feet from the basin, picking unhappily at Arya’s poor sewing. “We typically do. Excuse me.”

He takes his goblet and rises, but after draining it on his next sip, he turns and swipes Red Fly’s, too.

“I’ll let you choose: the goblet or your hand?”

Tyrion lifts his voice. “Your Grace, would you prefer your Hand to have two hands or one?”

Daenerys doesn’t turn around. She’s busy carefully cradling Lyaella in the water as Jon gently washes her skin.

“I would prefer two,” she answers, though her distracted tone tells Tyrion she hasn’t truly processed the question.

Tyrion lifts his eyebrows and brings Red Fly’s goblet to his lips. “You heard our queen. She prefers two.”

Red Fly smacks his hand into Tyrion’s stomach, hard enough to force the breath from his lungs and make him sputter his mouthful of wine onto the deck.

“You Grace,” Red Fly says, pulling the goblet from Tyrion’s weak hand. “Would you rather have an alive Hand or a murdered one?”

“Whatever you two are arguing about…I’m not taking sides. Sort it out. Oh, Jon, grab—”

Daenerys’s words are drowned out by the sound of a splash. At once, every head spins to look at Princess Lyaella in concern, but she’s still safe and cooing in Queen Daenerys’s hands. Moonbloom, on the other hand, succumbs to a tantrum at once. She’s flown towards Lyaella and foolishly landed in the basin and has decided instantly that she does not care for it. She screams so shrilly that Tyrion’s eardrums expand painfully. He lifts his hands to his ears, grimacing. The other three dragons glide and run over towards their fellow hatchling, screaming protest alongside her, and Drogon roars furiously from above the ship. Lyaella, clearly overwhelmed, begins shrieking, too.

Red Fly makes a rude hand gesture. He’s picking up bad habits from Jon’s Northmen.

“How was that Red Fly’s fault?” Grey Worm challenges, his eyes narrowed.

“He—…” Tyrion trails off. Their conversation pauses as Drogon swoops over the boat, momentarily blocking the sun and bathing them in darkness. He roars again, this time loudly enough to make the pieces on their Cyvasse board topple over.

“Oh, you stop!” Daenerys scolds, turning her face up to the sky. “She did that to herself! She’s fine!”

Jon snatches the dripping-wet dragon from the water. Moonbloom hisses and spits, her bright, scaled body trembling. Jon tucks her inside his cloak, tsking as he does. While he does that, Daenerys pulls Lyaella from the water and clutches her protectively to her chest, murmuring quietly to her as she howls. Tyrion abandons his conversation, suddenly concerned Drogon’s fit has frightened Sansa: she’s mostly at ease with the baby dragons, but Drogon still makes her uneasy. He gives the uncharacteristically-angry baby a wide margin as he crosses over to her. He hoists himself onto the bench beside her.

“You know,” he comments. “This is the least bored I’ve been the entire journey.”

Sansa’s undoing the stitches with her fingers, intent on the task. “Only you could be bored on a boat with four baby dragons, Lord Tyrion.”

“They sleep a lot,” he defends. “And truly, I’ve grown used to them.”

What he’s looking forward to is getting back to King’s Landing and getting back to work. He’d been sleepless the night prior, his mind churning with more ideas than he could record. He ended up sitting on the deck with the queen, king, and little princess nearly all night long; they both seemed uneasy with being beneath the deck for very long and spent a lot of time beneath the stars, and despite the late hour, it had been a good time to start planning for the future.

“I think we’ll be able to rebuild the Red Keep soon,” Tyrion tells Sansa. He knows that will please her, and it does. She smiles.

“Really?”

“So long as His Grace and Her Grace don’t find other uses for the funds. Which…”

“They might,” Sansa finishes.

“Yes. But I don’t suppose that’s a bad thing. We should feel lucky we have rulers who put the good of all above their own comfort. We all know my sister never did. Still, that being said, we should all like a more secure castle with rooms for the princess and space for her to play.”

“And more than one privy,” Sansa adds firmly.

“Yes. Certainly that,” Tyrion agrees. He watches on as Sansa threads a needle. “You’re very concerned about this blanket.”

“I just want it done properly,” she says, but Tyrion senses deflection.

He studies the blanket closer: it’s light and made of soft ivory, with lace at the edges. He knows it must be one of the items bought in the villages below the Dragonmont, though it’s nicer than the
simple gowns, swaddling clothes, and blankets Blue Rat brought back with him after his first journey to get supplies for baby Lyaella. And it couldn’t be from baby Lyaella’s trunk: Daenerys said that sunk to the bottom of the sea with the boat she had died on, taking everything but the blue gown Lyaella had been wearing the day of Lord Tyrion’s arrival with it.

Lord Tyrion’s eyes travel from the delicate blanket to Sansa’s face. She’s got a seriousness about her as she begins restitching the torn part, an air of authority, like this is her job and her job only. Understanding settles over Tyrion at once.

“You made this for the princess. Didn’t you? You made it back in King’s Landing, and you brought it with you when we came here.”

Sansa doesn’t look up from her needle. Tyrion is torn between tenderness and incredulity.

“But you never told the queen that you made it, did you?” he demands.

Sansa pulls the needle through the other side carefully. She finally looks up at Tyrion. For a second, peering at her guarded eyes and her proud, determined posture, he’s reminded forcefully of Catelyn Stark.

“No. I didn’t tell her.”

“But…” Tyrion trails off, reaching over to touch the blanket. He lifts it up. He studies the shining silver thread holding the dainty lace to the edges of the creamy combed linen. Great care had been put into this— great affection. “Why?”

She averts her eyes again. “I wanted to make the baby something,” she mutters.

“No. I mean, why didn’t you tell the queen you made it for the princess? Why didn’t you tell Jon? I’m sure they think it came from some peasant seamstress from the villages.”

Sansa lifts her shoulders. “I don’t know. I just couldn’t find the words.”

He shakes his head. “The princess loves that blanket. She holds the edge of it every time she’s wrapped in it.”

“I know,” Sansa says. Her words tilt up, and when he looks at her, she’s smiling as she pulls the needle back through the fabric. “That’s what really matters to me.”

Tyrion shakes his head again, definitively this time. “I’m going to tell her you made it! You deserve credit for this— it’s beautiful!”

“No, Lord Tyrion, I don’t wish for that. But thank you.”

It pains him to let it go, but if ever a lady deserved her wishes acknowledged and respected, it's Lady Sansa.

“It truly is fine work,” he persists.

“Thank you,” she says again, smiling this time. She finishes the stitch she’s on and then sets the fabric carefully in her lap, turning to face Tyrion. “You know, Lord Tyrion, Jon and Daenerys insist they don’t want or need a baby nurse, which means you and Ser Davos are going to have a very hectic year ahead of you. They’ll be quite busy with Lyaella. Daenerys and I thought, perhaps, I could step in to help, and Jon is fine with it, too.”
“As Master of Coin?” Tyrion guesses.

“In some manner, yes, though that’s not truly my title as it’s only temporary.”

Tyrion is torn. He’s relieved to hear that they’re looking at people to fill that council position—he’s eager to get back to operating solely as Hand—but he must admit he’s enjoyed the time he and Sansa have been working together.

“I think you’re a great fit for it,” he says truly, “though I shall miss our discussions.”

“Why?” Sansa asks curiously. “We’ll be on the small council together. I imagine all we’ll be doing for the next year is discussing things.”

He grins. “Then, Lady Sansa, I pray you don’t tire of my voice.”

“I’ll be one of the last who does. Red Fly, I believe, is first in line.”

“Without doubt,” Tyrion agrees. “But don’t let him deceive you: we’re like brothers, he and I.”

“Hm,” Sansa comments, politely noncommittal. “And Arya and I are sisters.”

Tyrion laughs loudly. “Precisely, Lady Sansa. Red Fly and I aggravate each other, but should anyone speak dishonorably of him, I would defend him until I was blue in the face. Like you and Arya.”

“I suppose so,” Sansa agrees, lifting the blanket back up. She sighs a moment later. “She really was only trying to help. She doesn’t know I made this blanket. I’ll apologize to her.”

“A conversation, I think, would do more good than a simple apology. You and Arya often shoot towards the same target; you’re just facing opposite directions.”

“That’s true, too,” Sansa agrees. “Whereas the queen and I shoot in the same direction towards the same target, yet miss narrowly every time.”

“Not every time,” Tyrion comforts. “And shooting, like all things, takes practice. It takes time. Thankfully, I think we’ve got plenty of it.”

Sansa resumes stitching, and he looks off at the sea, towards Drogon twisting through the sun-drenched clouds. They were all, in many ways, beginning again.

V.

Ser Davos sits beneath the gentle sun, the little princess sleeping in his arms. At his side, King Jon of House Targaryen sits, ten times the man he was at Castle Black—and infinitely better than all the kings who came before him. Ser Davos doesn’t need to see the future in any flames to know that.

“I understand Lord Tyrion’s point about tourneys being important in King’s Landing, but I should think a feast would be just as uplifting,” Jon says.

He and Ser Davos are both watching as the queen holds another square of raw meat out to Frostfire.

“I would rather feed the people—all of them—than host a tourney for lords and ladies,” Daenerys agrees.

She leans closer to Frostfire.
“Dracarys,” she whispers again, waiting.

Like the other dozen times, Frostfire merely snaps at the meat and then hisses in disgust when he tastes it. He still hasn’t seemed to realize that he can cook the meat, rather than waiting for someone else to do it for him. Or perhaps he’s lazy, Ser Davos thinks, and he mulls over that as he watches Frostfire scream impatiently at Daenerys.

Daenerys sighs, but she doesn’t give in. She rubs the front of Frostfire’s snout with her thumb; smoke emits from his nostrils in billowy gray puffs, and he sneezes.

“Dracarys,” she repeats again. Ser Davos isn’t sure how she’s maintained her patience this long. She looks ready to repeat the command again, but she stops, perking up at once as the smoke billowing from Frostfire’s nose grows darker, stormier—closer to Lyanna’s eyes than an overcast sky. A smile spreads over the queen’s face as feeble flames burst from Frostfire’s mouth, bathing her hand and the meat in fire. Ser Davos flinches in horror reflexively, half-standing in concern for her, but Jon grabs his forearm, easing him back down. He soon sees that she’s unharmed. She tosses the charred meat into the air; Frostfire catches it happily, his entire body trembling with joy.

“Good job,” Daenerys praises softly, stroking the light pink scales on his tummy. “Good job, Frostfire. Let’s try again.”

The dragon understands completely now. He gorges himself on burnt meat, practically preening by the end of the training session. Ser Davos doesn’t think he imagines the way he prances past the other three dragons, his pink chest puffed out.

“All right, your turn,” Daenerys says, swiping Silverstar up into her arms. But Silverstar seems to want to cuddle more than eat. Daenerys fights with her, laughing as she tries to burrow inside her sandsilk cloak. “No, we’re working,” she insists, but Silverstar doesn’t seem to care. “Oh, all right—another time, then. Storm?”

Jon’s dragon blasts past the other three, soaring smoothly through the air and landing on Daenerys’s knee. She arches an eyebrow.

“You’re a bit showy today,” she comments. She nudges him over onto the wet blanket—a fire precaution, though the dragon’s flames are so immature they couldn’t do much damage yet—and holds another square of meat out. “Okay, Storm. Dracarys.”

Ser Davos cries out this time, horrified. Fierce, overconfident flames explode from Storm’s mouth, consuming Daenerys’s arm and nearly brushing her face. She’s so taken aback that she drops the bit of flaming meat; Storm catches it mid-fall, chomping on it eagerly, and then he flies over to the bowl of raw meat and bathes that in fire, too.

“You naughty thing!” Daenerys exclaims, half-laughing and half-scolding. “No!”

Storm scarfs half the charred meat down, evading Daenerys’s hands as she reaches for him. She finally grasps him by the tail and hoists him into the air. He blinks at her, rumbling happily, not the least bit embarrassed.

“You are trouble,” Daenerys reiterates, her eyes narrowed. Smoke begins to tumble out again, but Daenerys reaches forward, gently closing her fingers around his snout. “No. Dracarys only.”

Storm decides to test her boundaries. He twists wildly until her hand slips from his snout, and then he nips at her and breathes fire on her hand. She stares hard at him, unflinching.

“Try it again and you’re going into the carrier,” she tells him, her voice dangerous.
Storm tries it again. Daenerys doesn’t back down; she turns, carrying the dragon over to the large carrier cage. Storm resists, bathing Daenerys’s hands in fire. When she still doesn’t relent, Storm looks over at Jon, his tiny, red-scaled head cocking in innocent befuddlement like he just can’t puzzle this woman out. In many ways, it reminds Ser Davos of Jon’s own look of utter astonishment after meeting headstrong Daenerys Targaryen for the first time, and he laughs quietly to himself.

“Don’t look at me,” Jon tells Storm. “You’re being naughty. Into the carrier you go.”

Storm grumbles. Daenerys sets him inside, closes it, and stands just outside the door, counting a full minute while Storm hisses and screams angrily. When a minute has elapsed, she turns back around, opens it, and waits as Storm leaps eagerly into her offered hands.

“Are you ready to behave properly now?” Daenerys asks sternly. “We must work together to keep our little princess safe, which means you need to learn how to control your fire. All the gods old and new won’t be able to save you if you ever accidentally hurt her: Moonbloom will devour you, snout to tail. Now, can we please go back to our lessons?”

In answer, Storm relaxes in her hands, his combative posture softening completely. Daenerys nods. She sets him back down on the wet blanket.

“Good. Okay…” she fishes one of the last un-cooked pieces of meat from the bottom of the bowl. “Dracarys.”

Storm is so happy to hear the command and breathe fire that he flies as he bathes Daenerys’s hand in flames, happy rumbling audible just beneath the roar of his fiery breath. Daenerys brings him into her arms afterwards, stroking the gray scales dispersed on his tummy and smiling down at him. For as hard as she’d been a second ago, she’s twice as soft now.

“Better,” she says proudly, her tone leaking love. “Now go show off to your brothers and sisters.”

That’s possibly all Storm really wanted. They all laugh as they watch him almost dance around the other hatchlings. Moonbloom looks at him with an expression so like human embarrassment that Ser Davos grows weak from the force of his laughter. As he’s chortling, Storm soars confidently over to Jon. He lands on his knee and nudges Jon’s hand eagerly.

“What?” Jon asks him.

Storm nudges him again, insistent. Jon reaches out and scratches the pointed scales beneath his chin.

“Good job, Storm,” he says, clearly assuming that’s what Storm wants.

Storm hops from his knee to his thigh, still brimming with some desire that’s not been met. Jon looks into the dragon’s eyes for a moment, and then he looks over at the bowl.

“All right,” Jon says. “One more time.”

Storm turns and glides back to the blanket. He sits there and waits eagerly for Jon. Daenerys steps to the side and watches as Jon rummages through the bowl, searching for another piece of raw meat. She meets Ser Davos’s eyes for a moment: they share a smile.

“Okay,” Jon says, setting the raw meat down on the blanket in front of Storm. “Dracarys— oh, seven hells!”

Storm had clearly saved the brunt of his abilities for Jon: at Jon’s command, he enthusiastically bathes the blanket in fire, the flames surging so far they singe Jon’s hands. He shakes them,
grimacing and wincing, and Storm cocks his head to the side, confused.

“Now you’ve got him all mixed up,” Ser Davos tsks. Daenerys walks over and takes Jon’s hands in hers, inspecting them. “He doesn’t know if humans like his fire or not.”

While Daenerys shows Storm Jon’s hands and attempts to explain to him that most humans can’t survive direct contact with flames, Ser Davos checks on the princess. Thankfully, she’s still asleep, unperturbed by the dragon drama.

“Well, they’re learning slowly. Even Storm. They know a bit more today than they did yesterday,” Daenerys finally says. “All right. Back to the tourney. No, I don’t think I want to do one to celebrate Lyaela’s birth. I do understand Lord Tyrion’s reasons, but I agree with you, Jon. A feast is more fitting. It can be like the feast after our wedding.”

Ser Davos respects that idea as much as he respects the king and the queen, but he thinks he sees a better way.

“What do you both think about doing the tourney, but opening up to everyone, highborn and smallfolk alike? I remember how much I longed to attend one when I was a boy. I’d see the knights and the highborn lords and ladies riding into King’s Landing, and I’d try to get as close as I could to see the action, but I never made it far at all. Let’s have the feast, but let’s also have the tourney. It needn’t be extravagant, and it’s a good way to better relationships with the nobles from other houses and show them all the work that’s been done in King’s Landing. I warn you, though, Your Graces… not everyone will be as pleased with it and as proud as I am. You speak to a Flea Bottom boy turned man; what you’ve done makes me believe in the world again. Makes me believe in goodness, in hope. But there are those that rely on the old wheel. For them, the success of the smallfolk means their own downfall. Your next battle will be convincing them the worth of human decency.”

The king and the queen’s posture remains tall and certain. They are not worried, and because that, Ser Davos isn’t, either.

“Their shock at the sight of our new world will be forgiven. A brief adjustment period will be forgiven. But they will not attempt to cloak our world in darkness again, and eventually, they too will step into the sun. I know they will,” Queen Daenerys says. “I have faith.”

Well, Ser Davos thinks, glancing down at the little princess as she makes an adorable, tiny sound in her sleep, no one could look into this little face every day and not have faith in something.

“It won’t be long now ’til we make land. I’m going to go tell Lord Tyrion what we decided,” the queen says. “I’ll take the dragons with me. Come along, little ones…”

One by one, three of the dragons flap up to her arms, some with more coordination than others. Moonbloom flies, too, but she comes over to sit at Ser Davos’s side instead of joining the others. He looks at the dragon, and the dragon looks back at him.

“She wants to curl up with Lyaela,” Jon explains, coming to retake his spot at Ser Davos’s other side. “We’re teaching her to ask the person holding Lyaela first.”


“Say ‘yes’,” Jon coaches. “That’s what she’s listening for— oh, well, she heard me say it. Here she comes.”

Moonbloom lands on Lyaela’s legs. Ser Davos is concerned that it hurts her, but Lyaela doesn’t stir at all. He watches in fascination as the baby dragon nudges and squirms her way inside Princess
Lyaella’s ivory blanket so she can curl up with her.

“Is it safe?” Ser Davos asks, thinking uneasily of the fire that Storm had managed to produce.

“Yes. They’re already bonded. Nothing in the world will tear them apart now.”

Like you and Daenerys, Ser Davos thinks proudly, his heart soft. He adjusts Lyaella and Moonbloom in his arms and looks over at Jon. In every way that matters, this man is his son, as near and dear to his own heart as his own flesh and blood had been. He would die for him in a heartbeat, die for Daenerys Targaryen in a heartbeat, die for the little princess in a heartbeat. All he’s ever wanted is for Jon Snow to feel like he belongs. To feel secure in his own skin, loved—indispensable to someone, a crucial part of a whole. All the things family gives a man.

To sit with him now and know he’s found it...that makes him prouder than anything else in the world.

King’s Landing looms closer to them, a colorful splash on the horizon.

“What comes next, Your Grace?” Ser Davos asks.

Jon is looking at his daughter. "Everything," he says. He reaches over to lightly stroke her silver curls off her forehead. His eyes are soft with tenderness, with joy. “We’ve got everything ahead of us.”

When Daenerys returns, she sits beside Jon and takes his hand in hers. Together, the four of them watch as the boat approaches King’s Landing. The city stretches out in front of them, a city teeming with growth and budding prosperity. And in the soil, in the water, in the sun— love.

“Welcome home, Your Graces.”

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