Everything Old is New Again

by Kimmeridge

Summary

Post s8 debacle. Daenerys is resurrected. Character study/vignettes over the years that follow. J/D romance, angst. Don't expect a lot of plot or book canon, I'm taking liberties with those.

Notes

Thank you for reading along - life is short and we only have so much time each day.
12 years, 8 months later

The doors of the room open, and two guards walk in with her slipping in wordlessly between them.

"Daenerys of the House Targaryen, the First of Her Name, Stormborn, Reborn of the Light, Queen of the Known World and the All the Seas, Sovereign of the Skies, Breaker of Chains and Mother of Dragons."

They recite her titles with the confidence of men who have done it dozens of times before.

"Leave us," she instructs and waits until they are gone.

Tyrion takes a moment to study the woman standing in front of him. She is dressed beautifully in a light violet sleeveless dress, but with flowing pieces of ombre tinted fabric hanging down from her shoulders that turn a dark purple as they flows down the sides of her body. It's as if she could take flight if she wanted to. Her hair is braided once again, but the braids are tighter and more numerous and swirl about the back of her head where they are twisted into a neat bun at the nape of her neck. He guesses by the size of the bun that she must have cut her hair much shorter than she used to keep it. There are no loose strands framing her face and it makes her eyes appear larger and that much more striking. Her skin is golden brown, almost unnaturally so given her complexion, evidence of so many years spent under the burning Essosi sun. Everything about her appears light, a stark contrast to the last memories he has of her.

She, likewise, eyes him up and down. He has aged considerably. His beard is trimmed neatly and his hair is grey. It is difficult to look him straight in the eyes too long without her composure slipping, so she walks past him and scans the room instead.

"So you've returned, the Queen of...everywhere." He says plainly.

"Temporarily; I've little interest in spending any more time here than is absolutely necessary."

"But there were things that required your attention in person?" He asks, though it is more a statement than a question.

She nods and stares at him, her gaze piercing and unrelenting. It is a relief to be speaking of business matters as it allows her to remain detached and deliberate.

"Like deposing Queen Sansa in the North," he ventures.

"Among other things, yes."

She is uneasy when he looks at her in judgment. There is a rage that builds within her when she thinks that he finds himself entitled to be critical of her. But she also feels strangely deferential to him, like a little girl looking up at a long lost father, desperate to believe that he still believes in her. Desperate for recognition of all that she's managed to achieve in spite of the fate that had befallen her.

"You don't approve, I take it?" She asks him, but her tone is dismissive.

"You did it in her ancestral home, in front of all the Northern Lords, with her own brother standing next to you and little warning. Your reasoning may be sound and objectively, the end result is what
you should have done, even from my perspective. But there are ways to do a dirty deed and have both parties walk away feeling clean."

"Quite an interesting take, coming from the way you dealt with me? Though I suppose it may not apply given that I didn't walk away at all," she replies, intending to sting him.

"There is a hypocrite in all of us," he admits.

"Understand that I owe you no explanation. But nevertheless, I wish you to know that I chose the manner of delivering the news so that my rule is transparent. I had previously made it perfectly clear to her that she had to make a choice, and she elected not to exercise any of the options provided. As it stands, she remains a Lady, hardly a punishment that fits the crime. And no Lord sitting in that room was left doubting my intentions or thinking me unclear, or worse yet, weak and ruling by proxy."

"Probably not." Tyrion agrees.

"And he is not her brother," she states unnecessarily.

"No, I suppose he is our King now, designated by you, in a land far away. Though I don't quite comprehend the intricacies of how this arrangement is to work given your intention to be here...temporarily," he notes, with a raise of his eyebrows.

"In the same manner that I rule all my kingdoms," she insists.

"I would venture that the other Lords would be quite pleased to learn of the unexpected side benefits," he remarks sarcastically, reminding her why she liked him so desperately in the first place.

A tiny, fleeting smile crosses her lips before she goes on.

"Are we maidens gossiping over our embroidery now?"

He nods slightly, allowing himself to be amused by her.

"You're not together, I take it?" He guesses.

"No," she says without hesitation. "He will rule here as I do in Essos - fairly and firmly but it will be on my behalf. Not beside me, but under me, as were the terms of our agreement when he made the decision to sail across the sea to seek my assistance."

Despite not having laid eyes on each other for over 12 years, they both know that this description, while technically correct, leaves out most of what matters.

"Do you know what I've always thought of unions between men and women that dissolve only to reappear again?" Tyrion asks, but doesn't wait for her response, "they are like books that we have read before - the particulars of the plot may be different, but we already know the ending."

"I suppose I should never step out of my armor then," she says, with the mild playfulness of a person who has had enough time to be able to make jest of the past. But he's not anywhere near that point.

"I meant-"

"I know what you meant," she cuts him off sharply, returning to her earlier serious disposition. "I did not seek out to return here. I was entirely satisfied to never set foot upon these shores and leave you all to live with the consequences of your decisions and wage war against each other as you've done
since the beginning of time."

"But he came to you, as I said. I once thought him smart and capable, but it seems more that his successes have come as a result of a recklessness borne of an indifference for his own life."

"Imagine that, this bloodthirsty madwoman you feared enough to have murdered, let him walk away unscathed, and gave to him the Seven Kingdoms."

"On her terms," he supplies.

"Yes, on my terms. And why should it be any different?"

"History is written by the winners," he acknowledges.

"And which are you, Tyrion? A winner, for successfully ridding yourself of me? Or a loser, for making a fatal mistake?"

Her eyes are blazing as she challenges him, but her tone and demeanor remain calm. He had started to wonder when they would get to the crux of the matter, and though he has thought of little else in the last few weeks since he was told that she was on her way here, he feels hopelessly unprepared.

"Was it a mistake?" He challenges her.

"You counselled my lover to have me murdered. Poor counsel, but merely the last of many." She shoots back.

"Would you be the woman today if things had played out differently? Would you have de facto control over the whole known world, even the parts you have no interest in, as you say? Would you have achieved it largely by way of peace? You did get your shining city on the hill in the end, we were just all wrong about the side of the sea where it sat."

"It would be so easy if it were that simple, wouldn't it?"

"Is it not?"

She purses her brows and looks somewhere just beyond him, intently.

"There was a child," she says quietly, then meets his eyes before continuing, "I assume by way of your reaction that he hasn't told you that much."

Tyrion's eyes close and his head tips forward in silent agony. In the brief moment before she speaks again, he begs whatever Gods are willing to listen that it's not true, that he imagined what she just said, that he's not a monster.

"I did not know either. They couldn't save her, it was too late, or she didn't have a purpose as they told me. I came back to the dead only to discover that a part of me that I didn't even know had lived was dead. Clotted blood and tissue, passing out of me, slippery in my hands. She would have been perfect, not like Rhaego..." she trails off.

"No, I did not know," he says softly, "and if you believe nothing I had ever said to you all those years ago, or will ever say to you again, trust this much - if I had known, I never would have considered the course of action that I ultimately took."

He is earnest and his eyes are shiny. She doesn't doubt that he speaks the truth to her. Nevertheless, some things are beyond forgiveness.
"After I found out, I dreamed of her every night, desperate to make sense of it all. Only death can pay for life. You are fortunate that you will never know what it is like to live every day believing that your child paid with their life for you to live. Some part of me still lives simply waiting to join her in the afterlife, wherever that may be, so that I can stop searching every crowd for a face that I've never known."

"Wars are not to be waged or won on the backs of children. Whatever vengeance you came here to exact against me, I deserve it," he says quietly. The sense of regret inside him threatens to overpower him. He doesn't understand how she continued on without bringing her hundred dragons and torching them all alive. He doesn't understand how Jon Snow had managed to look him in the eye and even heed his counsel in the last year, knowing that he played a part in convincing him to essentially kill his own flesh and blood. He wonders if he is cursed to always be in the thick of tragedies involving mothers and their dead babies.

"Maybe we are more alike still than I thought. I thought of nothing but revenge at first. Except that vengeance and justice are two sides of the same coin, and every time you flip it, your odds are about equal as to which side it will land on."

He notes how much more philosophical she is now than she had been in the past. He wonders if it is a result of age and introspection, or if she's replaced him with a better Hand, who had provided her with not just the practical advice about ruling nations, but enlightened her to look beyond what was right in front of her, regardless of how tempting that may be.

"Where does that leave us?" He wonders.

"You told me once that you believed in me. That you feared it made you sound silly or foolish but that you really believed that I could change the world for the better."

"I did," he confirms.

"Perhaps. But what you couldn't believe - you or Varys or Sansa Stark or Jon, none of you - is that a better world was indeed possible. You talked about it, but it was just platitudes. You could not conceive, within the confines of your own minds, how a world would function without a ruler who wasn't brutal, without men conspiring in the shadows, making the trade of information into an art form. Think what you will of me and my actions - but what choice did I have? Varys was attempting to poison me, and as soon as you had an alternative King in mind, you set about removing me and replacing me with someone whom you barely knew, whose only qualification was birthright."

She finds him looking up at her with a kindness she has not seen in too long.

"You know better than anyone that there is more to Jon Snow than birthright," he tells her gently.

"Be that as it may, all the things I had done - freeing slaves, walking through fire, assembling an army, fighting on behalf of the North at great personal cost, none of it mattered. In your mind, I was mad and cruel, because I had to be that way, for you to continue to justify your own actions."

"I believed in you!" He insists, "I had nothing to gain by wishing you mad."

"Ruling the Seven Kingdoms became an impossibility for me the moment that Sansa Stark told you about Jon's lineage. And I was the only one to recognize it as fact. How long do you suppose I would have lasted on on that throne before somebody murdered me to replace me with a man they previously saw as nothing more than a bastard of little consequence? A moon? To your credit, you managed it far sooner."
In all the years she'd been gone, he considered what had happened from many angles, except this one. Could it be true, that he had conceived of a narrative in his head and he made her fit that narrative to justify his own actions? Had she gone mad, or had they needed her mad to make their preference for Jon Snow palatable? In his heart he suspects it may be both, but nevertheless the price was only paid by her and that is what continues to hang heavy in the air between them.

"There have been many people over the course of my life who have held me in utter contempt. Half of my family, for a start. But I don't believe any of them had such a poor impression of me as you now. Why come and speak with me at all?" He wonders.

She takes a long breath, as if to steady herself.

"Because I want to look you in the eye when I tell you that you can no longer be Hand of the new King. I have told him so and now I stand her and tell you the same. I shall not have you killed or exiled, but I cannot, ever again, have you in a position of power, or worse yet, a position of influence. Lest you be tempted to make the wrong choice once more."

Their eyes are trained on each other. She is merciful, to do this, he thinks, and yet he is hurt that he will no longer play a role in her life and ashamed that he ever thought it possible that he could. From the moment he'd met her, it was as if she was the centre of the universe, every other man and woman rotating around her, stepping forward and back to serve and then fade away. He had been foolish to consider himself special, an object of permanence in a world that is fluid.

"Stay in King's Landing, or go to Casterly Rock, or sail the seas if you wish. You will be granted enough coins to give you a life of comfort. But you cannot be whispering the ear of the man whom you already managed to convince once to drive a dagger through my heart."

"I don't suppose I can change your mind?" He tries, but not forcefully.

"You can't," she confirms.

He lets out a long breath, deflating his lungs and sagging his shoulders. He is lucky to walk away with his life, and some would even consider it a stroke of luck to be free of all of one's obligations and duties. He is surprised at his level of disappointment, which he recognizes as being absurd given that for the majority of the last 12 years the mere thought of her had him fearing for his life. Today, he is beyond begging, and he knows it would be pointless. She has chosen her path forward and if nothing else, he respects her certainty.

"My Grace?" He turns to her before reaching for the door, for the first time openly acknowledging her as his ruler.

She turns around to look at him, one last time and the tension between them fades away, now that they have fallen back to their old roles.

"May I offer one last piece of unsolicited advice before we part?"

"A rhetorical question, no doubt," she replies, but allows him to proceed.

He dig his big toe in the dusty floor and draws a horizontal line, stretching across the front of his body. She glances down, then back up at him quizzically. For a brief moment she remembers placing the honorific pin upon his chest, in large part because he saw life as a puzzle that she lacked the patience to solve.

"It is a thin line between a man and a woman. Blurred by duty, and decimated by love," he asserts, erasing it with a swift sweep of his boot, "You are still young and you stand on top of the world."
Why not allow yourself to be happy now that happiness is within your reach? By Gods, you deserve it."

She considers for a moment the purpose of laying it all bare before an old friend-turned-foe. The truth is that she'd never managed to replace him, in all these years, and it has resulted in a disconcerting loneliness. She has her maids and her assistants and her military commanders. She now even has Jon Snow, back in her life, peculiarly distant and too familiar all at once. She spends much of her days inside her head, thoughts swirling. It has turned her more careful and cautious, qualities that have made her into a formidable Queen, yet she yearns for a friend's thoughts and counsel.

"I love Jon Snow. I have loved Jon Snow since I was twenty-two years old. I no longer think it a weakness to admit that I will probably always love him. And once, I thought that he loved me too."

It's the first time that she's spoken these words out loud and it is liberating.

"He did."

"If you don't put faith behind it and fight for your beloved when their very life is on the line, then your love is just as empty as the howling wind." She tells him softly, and it leaves him at a loss for words.

"I wish there was some other way," she tells him and he knows that she means it. She takes a few steps forward until she's almost closed the distance between them, pushing down the urge to ask him to stay, to believe in her once again, to be the Hand of a just and righteous Queen. But she knows that moving forward depends on closing doors on relationships that have left gaping wounds too deep to be repair.

"Goodbye, Tyrion Lannister," she says, laying a hand softly upon his shoulder before she walks past him and out of room. He knows that he will never see her again.
2 days to 2 months later

2 days after death

The first thought that she has when she opens her eyes again is that it's hot. The air is sticky, her hair is sticky. It smells like flowers, a maester's oily balm and the leathery skin of a dragon. Her hand goes to her heart as if by instinct, and she screams.

4 days after death

On the fourth day, she rises from her bed, finally strong enough to stand up and take stock of what has happened to her. The Red Priestesses have dressed her in a gauzy gown to help with the unbearable heat, and to not disturb her healing wound. She revels in the coolness of the stone beneath her bare feet.

They tell her that the Lord of Light had instructed them to place her body upon a stone table, adorn it with the feathers of a peacock and set it alight.

"Why a peacock?" She wonders.

"The flesh of a peacock is not affected by death. When the Lord of Light created the bird, he thought it too beautiful to allow to go to waste. And so he thinks of you."

They also tell her that the fire raged for nearly 5 hours before it settled in the embers at her feet. And then they waited for her to wake.

As the sun begins to set, she feels a terrible pain, spreading across her back in pulses and waves until it settles in her pelvis. The Red Priestesses beg her to lie down, believing that she's pushed herself too much, too soon. She finds herself gasping for breath, and clutching to the sides of her bed so tightly that her knuckles begin to go white. She feels the hot trickle, and then a gush of blood seeping down her leg, staining her gown and the bedding underneath. Her eyes fall closed in disbelief, then open and desperately look around the room for somebody to assure her that this is not happening to her. Again.

She spends many hours purging the life within her and then sits and weeps quietly.

"You are strong, My Grace," the main Priestess, Kinvara says encouragingly, "you can survive this."

"I know," Daenerys acknowledges, "that's the hardest part."

If she looks back, she is lost.

3 weeks after death

"Drogon will take me to Valyria," she tells Kinvara as they sit, side by side on a stone bench as the sun begins to set.

"There is nothing there but lost souls and dragons," Kinvara observes but Daenerys notices a distinct lack of objections.
"Then it sounds even more perfect than I imagined," she tells the Red Priestess and walks back to the small, simple house next to the temple around which the city of Volantis spreads like tentacles of a sea creature.

Inside, she strips down and examines her scar. It is healed but exceptionally ugly. Her left nipple ripped, not quite in half, but almost, not by way of the dagger but a long journey across the sea, and the way the skin has rejoined has left it slightly asymmetrical. At least I don't ever have to put an innocent baby to this breast, she thinks. When she stretches upon waking, the scar burns feverishly as if it were still fresh. If she lifts her left arm all the way up over her head, it feels like the skin of her chest is stretching and about to come undone at the seams. Thee scar is completely healed so she wonders if this is all in her head, and that makes it that much worse. Because it by definition will not get better as long as she lives. In perpetuity, she remembers.

When she bathes she sinks into the water and lets it do the work so that she doesn't have to touch herself. When she dresses, she does so quickly and methodically, never looking down below her neck.

She wonders if the Red Priestess will be the last person to see her stripped down to nothing.

8 weeks after death

She wakes every night, after the moon has risen to the highest point in the black sky. Her body is drenched with sweat. Her chest is tight. She can still feel the pain, as if somebody's hands reached in and squeezed her heart like they were wringing a wet cloth, until every drop of blood was gone. There was ringing in her ears, and the whoosh of blood coursing wildly through her body and out of it. Her hands and feel felt cold and then she was gone. Every night, she relives that moment, she recalls how she knew that she was dying and can't remember her other thoughts. She'd always wondered about a person's last thoughts – would they be filled with regret or pride or nostalgia even? But now she knows that death is just a primal act, unaccompanied by philosophy.

She finds a few scattered villages where the majestic city of Valyria once stood. None have more than 40 or 50 people in them. The inhabitants are strange, for the most parts. Some of them appear to have magical abilities; one day she sees a boy of no more than 5 or 6, levitating a small stone in the air, directing it with his hand. Nobody but her sees it as strange. Another day she observes a door materialize in the solid wall of a house and an old man stumbles through it, then the door disappears. As if it were a trick of the eye.

The villagers are in awe of her and the enormous dragon who is never far. They welcome her as if she belongs with them, on the basis of her own unique nature. Her High Valyrian is not as proficient as theirs and on occasion they laugh at her accent, but not unkindly. She has always been exceptionally good at mastering languages and sees this as a new challenge.

She asks a kindly elderly lady to help her cut her hair very short but the lady begs her to leave it. It's a sin when you look the way you do, she reasons. Instead, the woman gives her a small jar of a rusty red paste.

"Otizje," she says by way of explanation, "the married women of Naath rub it in their braids, butter and oil and red ochre." At the mention of Naath, Daenerys wants to crumble, but then thinks, maybe it's a sign, maybe it's a way for her to stay connected to Missandei. She has her hair braided in dozens of braids cascading down her back and rubs the paste over them. She is almost unrecognizable.
Within the first few days, Drogon takes her to the edge of a cliff overlooking a narrow canyon with a river running down the middle. The riverbanks are grassy and lush in stark contrast to the barren reddish stone cliffs above and that's when she sees them. Another dozen dragons or more, flying in loose formation from the bottom of the canyon towards her. They land around Drogon. They are not quite his size but are not that much smaller. They study her curiously and unthreateningly. Drogon roars and they approach her, gentle but proud. They are all unique: one is such a dark, shiny jet black, that he appears blue in the right light, one is a dusty grey, a couple of others resemble Rhaegal and Viserion. Are these his children, she wonders? From the time that he was gone?

The dragons follow her down to the nearest village and the people there fall to their knees. It's a scene she's seen many times over. She isn't filled with the same exhilaration she used to feel but it does make her feel more like her old self.

The dragons stay nearby and in the coming days she flies with them, studying the lands and expansive coastline around the islands. They take her to one cave, then another and another, lined with eggs, waiting to be hatched. She understands then that she'll never be alone again and that soon there will be so many of them that she could rule the entire world with ease.

But it does nothing to take away the night terrors and soon they start to spill into the day. She dreads her meals because they are quiet and lonely affairs which allow her mind to wander and then she feels sick to her stomach and reflexively gags on her food. She was always thin, but now she worries that she's little more than skin and bone. She is unsettled, and has episodes where she feels like her breath is seizing, her heart is fighting its way out of her chest and she can't think straight. They pass, but she lives in fear of the next one coming. It is an "attack of the mind and spirit," a local witch tells her and offers a tea to calm her nerves. Daenerys declines, thinking that a heart that hurts is at least a heart that beats.

When her dragons breathe fire, it feels like every tiny hair on her body stands up, taking her back to that terrible day. When people look at her, she feels compelled to smile often, no matter how tedious. If she is unfriendly, they could turn on her. If she is angry, they might start plotting against her. If she is moody, they might think her mad. She feels paranoid, but mostly she feels afraid, all the time.
Chapter 3

4 months after death

The villagers help her erect a hut where she stays. The seamstresses make her dresses in exchange for the plentiful meat that the dragons provide. She doesn't let a single one of them take measurements of her in the nude, both because it makes her uncomfortable and because she doesn't want to invite speculation. The young men in the village happily fetch water from deep, cool wells at the edge of the forest, each eager to receive a smile, and maybe with time, more. She has no interest, but she recognizes the power of her allure and uses it without hesitation.

She finds that Valyrian rolls off her tongue easily, she eats with her neighbours sometimes, walks in the fields, but she is lonely. She's known the feeling her entire life, but she's never been this alone. Her brother was always there, as was whatever Lord in Pentos who was willing to take the risk of housing them. When she was married off to Drogo, she was always surrounded by people. And after that, she'd never been on her own for long. One more dragon has hatched and he reminds her very much of her children that she hand reared. But dragons can't speak with her or interpret her dreams or advise her what to do next.

Her bone chilling fear subsides, but only a little. It is mostly replaced by anger, a fury without an outlet. On those days she retreats deep into the countryside, near the base of the volcano where other people dare not explore. Heat and fire neither bother nor frighten her. She welcomes the burning feeling of hot rock against the bare soles of her feet. Her mind wanders to the last years, the decisions she's made, good and bad. There are many doubts, but none greater than her choice of advisors, friends, and lovers. Was she a terrible judge of character, and was that the first of many missteps on her journey? Tyrion believed in her initially – even to this day she doesn't question that. Lies spill from the mouths of men but their gaze upon her when they didn't think she was looking always revealed the truth. And even in her greatest moments of rage, she doesn't really believe that he set out to destroy her. But perhaps she hadn't considered that he'd been away from the game for too long, in a land too far away. And when he returned the rage towards his sister had softened with time. The ties that bind a family; she was willing to admit she knew nothing about that. Varys was an opportunist and she would never make the same mistake again: to trust anyone who don't see their word as their bond. Ser Jorah died for that concept, and she was taken aback by how deeply she continued to mourn him. She even starts to think that the moment of his death is what sealed her fate. Everything that happened after that brought her a step closer to destruction.

Weeks pass before she allows herself to think about Jon Snow. She is overwhelmed by her feelings and doesn't know how to begin to sort them. It takes her by surprise how much of her anger is directed towards his family. His sister, Sansa, primarily, who hated her from the moment she set her eyes upon her without reason or justification. Who sacrificed nothing in the fight and sat in the comfort of her castle while others shed blood for her. The lack of gratitude, the lack of introspection and the single-minded way in which she targeted her makes Daenerys' blood boil. With that comes embarrassment that her ire is directed at another woman, whose main sin was to be overly ambitious and self-centred when the real source of the pain was her brother, who broke Daenerys' heart before he stilled it for good measure. She desperately wants to go back in time when she could and probably should have banished him from Dragonstone for refusing to bend the knee. The Night King and his undead had been behind that wall for thousands of years and would have stayed here but for a reanimated dragon. How stupid she had been to play savior to a man she had just met. But something had inexplicably drawn her to him. Maybe the same blood that coursed through their veins. It doesn't escape her, not for a second, that they are the only two left of a proud people, separated by a sea, neither with any interest in seeing the other again. She knows nothing of his fate, nor can she predict
the outcome of her own. Her loneliness is unbearable, and she knows that she has to make a change before her life spirals out of control. She has to start living again.

She rises one day before dawn and summons Drogon, whispering in his ear. He looks at her longingly, hesitant for the first time in his life to follow orders. His eyes question her, but she is unyielding and she is his Mother so he sets out to do what she's asked. She keeps one of the other larger dragons by her side in his absence and names him Orion. He has Drogon's temper but is less playful and borders on broody. In some other life, she would find this at least a little bit funny.

Four days later, Drogon is back from Meereen, with a stunned Daario Naharis stumbling off his back, falling at her feet. In her past life she would have seen this as a sign of weakness and would have used it as justification for leaving him at arm's length forever. A union with him didn't make sense, not for a woman meant to be Queen. His unflinching devotion to her almost turned her off and worse yet, made her pity him. There was no challenge and no drama when it came to this man. But she is a different woman now, living a different life, and today she throws herself unabashedly into his arms and lets him hold her until the sun goes down and they are left lying beneath the starry sky.

She takes her time removing her clothes so to allow her to study his reaction intently. He is horrified, not by her, but for her. She sees the tears in his eyes, driven in equal part by rage and grief for her and so she doesn't tell him of the searing pain she feels when he covers her breast with his warm hand.

They spend 20 nights together until she almost forgets the ugliness of her body. They watch two more eggs hatch and marvel at the newest baby dragon, crimson red with a black belly. They swim in the sea, eat plump fruit with hundreds of juicy red seeds and she talks to him about her time in Westeros. She tells him of Ser Jorah's valiant bravery and how heavy the sword felt in her hands when she tried to save them both during the long night of horrors. She tells him of Varys' and Tyrion's betrayals and while she can see that he is seething with rage, to his credit he holds whatever temptation there is to tell her that he'd warned her to take him with her, that he'd warned her these men didn't know her like he did and that the dwarf was dangerous. She tells him eventually about Jon Snow and his true name, how she had saved him more than once, how he had been the only person she'd seen climb a dragon on his own before, other than her, of course. She tells him about family and claims on thrones and lineages and he rightly asserts that all those things should be cast aside if she is serious about breaking the wheel.

"Determining his own future, is that not the greatest aspiration of man?"

"And yet you tell me that I should fight back and reclaim what is mine? To rule every man precisely because of my right of birth," she points out.

"Because people want to believe that there is somebody who is great and who will rise to organize them, defend them, and lead them. Not as slaves, but as free men."

"It is a pleasant dream," she acknowledges, "but that's all it is. There comes a time where everyone starts to desire more than they have – more land, more coin, someone else's woman. It has been like this since the dawn of time and I was a fool thinking that I could change it."
"You did so here," he points out, "Meereen is thriving. I have had the coffers filled to the brim at the Iron Bank thrice over and with great ease. The Bay of Dragons is the wealthiest place in all the known world."

"I can never thank you enough for what you've done there in my name. With no assurance of anything in return, that loyalty is almost incomprehensible to me."

"It isn't your gratitude that I was after," he says pointedly.

"Nevertheless, you shall have it."

"How long until all the dragons are of fighting age?"

"All? We have a hatchling every couple of months and the adults keep laying eggs," she says, "but I don't want them to fight, not if they don't have to."

"Let's put aside the dragons for a moment – I've told you that we have wealth beyond our need in this lifetime or the next. Money buys a lot of things. Armies, for one."

"I have no interest in being the Queen of Sellswords, Daario. And even less interest in conquest where I've paid for blood with gold."

"Surely you've considered how we can take back what's yours even while you insist that you're never going back?" He asks her incredulously, aching to take revenge on Jon Snow, his entire family and anyone else who ever looked at the love of his life the wrong way. She doesn't meet his eyes, and he senses that he's hit upon a sore spot.

"It can't be fear," he continues when she doesn't answer him, "you're the mother of dragons, you'll have a dragon army in a few years that could scorch all of Westeros to the ground in a day. You could rule them all like the dogs that they are."

She loves his devotion to her, and his staunch belief that there is no question that the world should be hers for the taking. Daario Naharis saved me when I had lost faith in myself, she thinks.

"I'm never going back there," she tells him insistently, "and I wish that I'd never been born there. But I'm not modest enough to be a village girl either. I am Daenerys Targaryen, and I will be a Queen again. If there is work to be done here, then we shall rise up and do it as there is no one else willing. We will rebuild Valyria from the ashes and ruins until it is the greatest city in the known world. We will show the people of Pentos and Braavos and the women and children scattered across the Dothraki Sea that they no longer have to live by another man's leave. But over there," she waves her hand west, "are different people with hatreds that go back a hundred years or more. Whose minds have been thoroughly poisoned against me. I could never rule them except as slaves."

"Then what has come of your death? No consequence for anyone?"

"My death has freed me. They're still living in the same shackles they've always been in."
They settle into their routine in the next few days, and the mood between them is light. She finds it easy to lose herself in him and she feels mildly guilty as the insistence grows within her to forge ahead with her plans, knowing it involves hurting him again.

"I know that you would go to the end of the world for me, if I asked, and while I hadn't planned on asking when I first sent Drogon for you, I will now." She says on a bright and cloudless morning after a night when she allows him to take her time and again, hoping to forget the pain that creeps up if she lets her thoughts wander to the past.

"It's not fair, because you will say yes and we both know it, but I'm going to do it anyway," she warns him, as if that may soothe the hurt.

"Ah, there it is, the inevitable send off," he looks at her ruefully with those soulful brown eyes but she doesn't sense anger or resentment in him.

She offers him a tiny smile and he finds comfort in the warmth of her gaze.

"Tell me one thing to make my day?" He asks playfully, "Was he hunched back? Did he run like a girl? Was he short?"

That makes her laugh unabashedly for the first time in a very long time.

"There it is! He was short!" Daario exclaims and they laugh together before she turns serious again.

"You and I could never be," she says kindly, cupping his left cheek in her small right hand, "not in this lifetime. But if there is a next one, where I am unburdened by my name and my destiny, I shall hope that we cross paths and have a chance to forge a different path on our own terms."

Her eyes are apologetic, not because what she is asking is extraordinary or any more dangerous than what he's done for her a hundred times before, but because she again feels so few heartstrings pulled at the thought of sending him away. She will miss him, but the core of her being won't feel as though a piece of it is gone. That is a familiar feeling to her, and one wholly unrelated to Daario Naharis.

"What can I do for you, my Queen?" He looks down at her and she feels undeserving of him.

"I need you to take Drogon, and a few of the others, and bring Grey Worm to me. You say that you have heard tales of him crossing from Naath to Sothoryos, so he should not be hard to find, not with an army of that size and all those ships."

"I'm not leaving you here alone," he protests.

"I won't be alone, I'll be left with more than enough dragons to cause any man to shit himself, as they say," she tells him with a small smile, "and the people here bear no ill will toward me."

"Why do you need to see Grey Worm if you're not going back to Westeros? Why not let him fulfill what he thinks is his duty?"

"Because I want to look him in the eye and apologize to him for bringing him and Missandei to that wretched place. Because I want him to know that I will live out my days making sure that her death wasn't for nothing. I will burn all those who would put anyone in chains. I am not mad – madness is accepting this as a way of life. No more."

"Essos...Sothoryos, these are big ideas."
"Then it is good that we are not small men. I need Grey Worm to join you until all of Essos is as I've imagined it would be – free and peaceful and prosperous. We will begin here in Valyria. This is where my ancestors are from and this is where I belong."

He bends down and kisses her, holding her to him so tightly that she thinks his hand may leave a mark on her lower back. She is pliant in his arms, giving him this comfort willingly, as he has comforted her this last month and brought her out of the depths of despair. They both know their lives will only run in parallel going forward.

"I will do as you ask," he tells her, his voice strong and unaltering.

"Good. Let us begin."
8 years after death

8 years after death

“She was shipwrecked, on the north coast. The Vlaii found her while they were setting their lobster traps for the night. She speaks the common tongue, Your Grace.”

Daenerys stands up and walks closer to inspect the young woman before her, though she knew her identity with absolutely certainty the moment the guards brought her into the sun-filled room. It’s what she loves most about Nysos – the stonemasons have built the towns of local stone, white washed to absorb less of the sun’s scorching heat. The result is that even indoors, she feels as if though she is standing in the morning light.

The woman’s hair is shorter than she remembers, the ends curling up from humidity. It makes her look younger than her years, though her skin tells the tale of years spent out in harsh climates. She is also thin, and Daenerys wonders how long she’s spent out on the barren and rocky north coast alone.

“Arya Stark,” Daenerys remarks, “I believe I do not need to introduce myself. Do you know where you are?”

“No,” Arya responds, “but I don’t think I’ve died or that you’re a vision.”

“Nysos,” Danerys responds, ignoring the implications, “east of Sothoryos, just south of the southeastern coast of Essos. Until now, part of the Unknown World. Not a pleasant place to survive on your own.”

She turns and speaks to her guards in a language that Arya does not recognize, and they take Arya away.

Arya spends the night in a small room that reminds her more of a servant’s quarters than a prison cell. It is bare, but there is a window that offers a view of rocky, reddish hilltops just beyond the city. She expects that she will stay awake and on guard, but she hasn’t slept much in days and her eyes grow heavy as dusk settles outside. In the morning, the sun’s rays are nearly blinding and she rises to her feet when breakfast is brought to her. A bowl of finely ground porridge that unlike in Westeros is
very sweet and spiced with what she recognizes from her days in Braavos to be cinnamon, and something else, stronger and more aromatic. There is fresh fruit on top and a glass of goat’s milk. She thinks that it’s the best food she’s had in years, and wonders whether all of the Dragon Queen’s captives eat this well.

When she’s done, she sets her empty bowl and cup on the floor and bangs on the door, calling for attention but nobody comes for a long time.

She knows that she will come face to face with the Dragon Queen again. Were it not so, she would have been killed already. Nobody has come to torture her, extract information, or insist on some sort of admission of guilt. The idea brewing in her head is bold, even dangerous, but it could be her only chance to change the course of history.

The door suddenly swings open and a beautiful woman with dark skin and big brown eyes motions her to exit the room and follow her.

“Where are you taking me?” Arya demands and is met with nothing but silence.

She is led through a long corridor lined with hanging pots of bright flowers and succulents, through an archway and onto a large outdoor terrace overlooking the waves crashing against a rugged shoreline. Above her, Drogon is perched on a reinforced stone podium, the purpose of his presence made perfectly clear as he lets out a threatening roar. Arya finds nobody else on the terrace so she walks to the intricate edge, resting her hands against the smooth stone that is already warm early in the morning.

“Good morning,” Daenerys’ voice startles her from behind and she swings around to face the tiny, blonde Queen.

“I take it you found your chambers satisfactory?”

“You’re alive,” Arya notes, and feels silly for saying it almost immediately.

“As are you. The seas in this part of the world are not kind. You must have exhausted several of your lives.”

“It was the Lord of Light that brought you back. The way he brought back my brother.” Arya
“The irony does not escape me,” Daenerys replies.

“I heard stories, from men who traveled the seas. They told tales of a Dragon Queen, hair red as clay, skin made golden by the sun. That she freed people and built cities where water ran under ground for everyone to drink, always clean. That she was a Red Priestess, an ancient one that walked to the ruins of Valyria barefoot from the high grass one day and ruled the next and that she had an army of dragons that were invisible until they had to come to her aid and then their majesty was a sight to behold.”

Daenerys can’t help but smile at the description and the thought that she’d become a subject of legend.

“I am not a holy woman and my dragons are not invisible, though it would be a pleasant benefit I suppose.”

“And the rest?” Arya wonders.

“Not so far from the truth.”

“Could we speak, candidly? Or do you intend to throw me back into the sea?”

It’s the first time that Daenerys sees that spark in Arya that Jon talked about each time he mentioned her. Most people would be intimidated into silence or beg for their lives in a situation such as this one.

“You’re still standing before me, are you not?” Daenerys points out the obvious.

“Westeros is falling apart. The Iron Bank is providing support to the Sealord of Braavos who has bought himself The White Guard, 30,000 men on white horses who hold a ceremony to auction their killing services to the highest bidder. They lie in wait until the people of Westeros starve or die in a half a dozen rebellions between each other and Westeros is theirs for the taking. But you must know this, as the Queen of Essos.”
“The matters of Essos do concern me,” Daenerys confirms.

“But?”

“What Essosi Lords do beyond our borders, I do not take issue with. They know the extent of my grace – no slavery, no forced labour, no violence against women and children. If an outsider thinks that they can bring peace and order to Westeros, perhaps it is time to permit them to try. Could it be worse than what it is today?”

“Our land is not for the taking!” Arya responds, her anger rising.

“I know that better than most.”

“A hard lesson,” Arya acknowledges.

“And what if I were to order them not to cross the Narrow Sea?” Daenerys challenges her.

“Then you have a chance to bring peace yourself.”

Daenerys walks to the terrace ledge to the right of Arya and gives a long sideways glance. As she is about to speak, Arya continues, looking her straight in the eyes.

“The North is starving. Has been for years now. There hasn’t been a proper harvest since winter had set in. Dorne went into open rebellion less than a year after you…left. The Reach hoards its grains and trades only with Dorne, in exchange for an uneasy peace. The men of the Iron Islands pillage now and then, going deeper inland as things become more desperate. The Black Death spread in King’s Landing and the surrounding Crownlands, cutting the Vale off from the south.”

“And King Bran?” Daenerys asks, knowing the answer.

“He was one the many to perish.”

“I was told about his fate, about a year ago,” Daenerys admits. “It is not that I was interested, but his
gift of sight always presented a challenge for me.”

“He was my last brother…” Arya trails off, with the simple sadness of a child.

“You put the wrong brother in the throne.”

Arya doesn’t know what she expected to hear, but not this.

The two women face off, studying each other closely. They do not have a particularly complicated or long history. All those years that Daenerys spent thinking about which person from the past will be the first she will face in person, Arya never crossed her mind. This leaves her somewhat unprepared now.

“Clean yourself up, and I will show you this part of my kingdom,” she finally says.

“They have water that comes from a corkscrew you turn,” Arya remarks, her voice tinged with a sense of wonder. All the things she has seen on her travels, and it’s this simple device that’s captivated her imagination.

“The Vazena. You turn the corkscrew and the water comes, from a long metal pipe that has another corkscrew at the bottom, that is turned and that moves the water up.” Daenerys explains.

“I’ve not seen that anywhere, and I thought that I’d been everywhere,” Arya confesses.

“The people here are simple, but they have some remarkable things. We burn the water, as you would when cooking, then we pass it through the Vazena and people drink. We store water in metal basins, then we set fire underneath and put some of our foods inside other metal pots which are soldered shut and placed in the hot water. The Vlaii alagba, their meisters, invented this to make food safer. People here are not sick when they eat or when they drink. They have showed us their methods and we have brought them horses and goats so that the sea is not their only source of survival anymore.”

“Valyria has this water and food now?”
“And soon, all of Essos,” Daenerys states definitively.

“And you did all of this?” Arya wonders.

“There are many ways to build a thriving kingdom,” Daenerys asserts, “war is one of them. Keeping your people alive and well is another. Women in Valyria are giving birth to more children than anywhere else I’m aware of. And their children are strong and healthy and live past the treacherous first years. I will make sure all of the people under my rule have the same opportunity.”

“You make it sound so easy.”

Daenerys smiles at her and Arya can tell it is a genuine smile by the way it reaches all the way up to the eyes and turns their corners upward.

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didn’t return, a smoking pit of ash and uninhabitable lava but now your towers reach the sky once again. Sothoryos, so wild even I did not wish to step onto its shores, lives in peace and trades its gold and gems with you openly and fairly without threat of theft. Fear cuts deeper than swords, this I know to be true, but your people respect you because they don’t live in eternal fear of you.”

“We have a bond forged out of a common desire to survive,” Daenerys tells her, “but there have also been conquests. Sometimes peace can only be borne of violence. Within limits.”

“You could rule the entire known world,” Arya notes.

“A surprising view from a woman who was once a girl who thought that her brother was the one true King. And he certainly ensured that I would not be in his way. A conclusion that I doubt you protested.”

“My brother came to you asking for help once, and you took a chance and obliged and helped save the whole world. I understand that you paid the greatest price for that. But you cared at one point, and I am asking you to care again.”

Arya notices the pleading in her own voice is getting more insistent but it does not appear to move the woman in front of her, who calmly looks her over as if she is meeting her again for the first time and attempting to size up her worth.

“How much time have you spent at home in the last nine years?” Daenerys asks Arya.

“Not more than a month, three years ago.”

“So you hardly belong there anymore, don’t you think?”

“I will always be a girl from the North,” Arya responds, with a touch of childish haughtiness.

“But you are not living your days there, the good and the bad. And so when you come here asking me to interfere in Westerosi matters again, you ask me as a person with nothing to lose. Not your land, not your title, not any children and not even your life.”
“And nothing to gain,” Arya is quick to interrupt.

Daenerys offers her a slight nod of approval.

“Perhaps. But nevertheless, I would be returning to once more attempt to rule over a people who view me as a foreign whore at the behest of one of their own. I crossed the sea once, with advisors from my and your strange homeland who in a very short time conspired to have me murdered and removed and replaced with one of their own. I may not have as sharp of a mind as that of Tyrion Lannister, but I would be an utter fool to err in the same way twice.”

Two days later, a ship is ready, complete with a crew of men to send Arya back into the open seas.

“You know that I will have to tell him that I’ve seen you with my own eyes, that I spoke with you.” Arya says.

“Of that I have no doubt,” Daenerys replies.

“And yet you’re letting me leave knowing my intentions?” Arya challenges her.

“I heard that you left Westeros, sailed west, chasing the falling sun as it set, hoping to find something. You left your family and your home. I hope that you did not look back when you boarded that ship in King’s Landing. Don’t turn around now and look longingly at what belongs in the past, Arya Stark.”

Arya watches the diminutive woman turn and walk away from the water, followed by her guard of half a dozen men nearly twice her size. Two dragons fly ahead, sweeping their wings across the clear skies as if waving their own farewell.
8 years, 5 months later

Chapter Notes

I do not write particularly quickly, it's just that most of this was posted elsewhere while I waited for access to ao3. Thanks for following along.

8 years, 5 months after death

A raven finds Jon Snow while he is helping to cobble together a temporary hut for a new wildling family before they decide which clan they will live with permanently. His hands are calloused, but he enjoys the physical labour and the camaraderie of the fellow men working with him. He has gotten to know them, one by one, over the years, and while he accepts that he will never fully be one of them, they treat him like family.

He has gone south to Winterfell but one time – when Sansa summoned him to tell him in person that Bran had died. He found himself too numb to be heartbroken and wondered whether life beyond the Wall had hardened him. People were born and died without pomp or circumstance in the distant woods, their lives mourned for the shortest time before the instinct to survive took over and they moved on. Part of him also seemed to recognize that this was the inevitable conclusion of a poorly cobbled-together ruling alliance. Bran, for all his extraordinary gifts, did not lead, nor did he inspire anyone to follow. Jon had found himself grateful that his brother died an ordinary death – of disease, like a hundred thousand of the people he ruled. That death did not differentiate or assign to him a violent end.

This raven does not request his presence, but rather announces that a visitor would be arriving in a fortnight.

Nothing good can come of this, Jon thinks to himself but recognizes that it’s too late to send a note back demanding the intruder stay away. And on a practical note, it isn’t as if he has access to parchment.

“You’re looking well, Jon Snow. The North agrees with you,” Tyrion remarks as he approaches, rubbing his hands together in silent protest of the harsh climate.
“You’re looking the same,” Jon responds dryly.

“A good head of hair,” Tyrion says, pointing to his head, “will make up for a great many shortcomings as you are aware.”

Jon chuckles and remembers why he always felt surprisingly at ease with a man who could have been a lifelong enemy.

“If you and I are to meet again, may the Gods find it in them to direct us to where our balls won’t shrivel to the size of cranberries from the cold.”

“Nobody forced you to journey all the way up here,” Jon points out.

“No, you are right about that. And I did consider it, for a long time after your sister paid me a most interesting visit,” Tyrion says somewhat mysteriously.

“Sansa’s soft spot for you has not hardened through the years?” Jon guesses. “Is she alright?”

“Queen Sansa is doing about as well as could be expected given all the challenges the North continues to face. I did see her, as I passed through Winterfell and she sends her regards. But it’s not her that I speak of.”

“Arya?” Jon guesses after a moment, not sure why he’s had to think so long about it.

“Is there another I’m not aware of?”

“Why did Arya come to you?” Jon asks, dread filling him instantly. He will always feel overprotective of her and see her as a child. Even if she saved the world. She has spent all her adult life far away from the miserable memories of Westeros and he’d feel better if she never returned, even if it meant he would not see her again.

“She was returning from her travels, which had taken her to some interesting places. Where the fates saw it fit to have her meet with interesting people. One in particular.”
Jon watches him, willing himself to stay still and his mind to stay stiller. Not to wander to places from which there is no return.

“She is alive, you know. The tie that binds us.”

Jon closes his eyes, willing himself to feel nothing but the crisp air and the scratchy fur of his collar. No names need to be spoken. He feels as if the wind has been knocked out of him. Or perhaps it’s the last 8 years of mental anguish.

“I’ve heard…stories. I didn’t know for certain.”

“Arya met with her, on Nysos. The islands of paradise, she says, hot and full of colour, where the air is always heavy, like the heat that rises after a summer rain. Far from here, land that we never even knew existed.”

“Arya would be the one to find her.”

“She is well. One might say she’s exceptionally well,” Tyrion continues, hoping to elicit something more than the flat response he has gotten so far, given the subject matter.

“Good,” Jon says after a pause but he can’t continue on because he feels like he is drowning on dry land.

“Nysos. Sothoryos. Essos. They are hers. Some by conquest, but most by free will. She lets them be, it appears. Even the most base of savages that are under her rule are better off today than we are.”

“The goats and chickens of Dorne are better off today than we are,” Jon points out.

“A hundred dragons. Maybe tenfold more. She didn’t exactly round them up for inventory,” Tyrion continues, relentlessly.

“Eight years I’ve been paying my penance up here. I could have left a hundred times but I couldn’t
find it in me to forgive myself. Now you come up here to tell me she’s the world’s savior? To torture me further? To share in your own sense of guilt? No thanks.”

Jon walks out into the biting cold and watches his ragged breath come out in white puffs against a pale blue sky. Snow crunches beneath his feet as he keeps walking, as far as his legs will take him from the man whose presence has never brought him anything but grief.

She’s alive, she’s breathing and she’s alive, he repeats to himself again and again until he starts to believe it. I haven’t killed her, I did kill her, but I haven’t, not really, she’s alive. He’s overpowered by the thought of her, as images flash before his eyes, the good, the bad, the hideous. He can’t remember anymore what she smells like, and he doesn’t trust his memories even when it comes to the colour of her hair, her eyes, the feel of her skin beneath his hands. How she looked at him when he was inside her. The way she looked at him when she last exhaled.

He walks until he is too exhausted to walk anymore, then he drops to his knees in the deep snow and screams in despair and relief.

“You need to go see her,” Tyrion says.

“No.”

“I say this as a man fully aware that my next meeting with the Mother of Dragons will more than likely be my last day among the living. I would not do this if I did not think it the only way.”

“No,” Jon buries his head in his hands. He feels utterly exhausted. He doesn’t think himself to be a man with a particular flair for drama but it does seem as if his life has turned into a prolonged cycle of suffering.

“I don’t care what that redheaded oaf of man has convinced you – you do not belong up here. Your entire life is an argument for a higher purpose. And this is it, Jon Snow. This is your chance to reset everything.” Tyrion insists, in his most persuasive tone.

“No!” Jon rises to his feet. “A thousand times no, in the event you’d like to offer me that many reasons why I should go.”
Tyrion also stands up until they’re squaring off against each other.

“I can understand that you have spent all these years beyond the Wall and don’t appreciate what has happened down south. Your sister is teetering on the edge of starvation. The only reason everyone in Winterfell and north of it is still alive is because so many have died off that the relatively few who are left can be fed. For a little while longer anyway. What do you think will happen to the Queen when her subjects have to bury their emaciated children? To say nothing of the south – a weak King’s Landing barely recovering from the Black Death, the Dornish Prince biding his time before his forces attack, the Reach holding what little is left of the food, and the great unwashed hordes of Essos chomping at the bit to do away with us altogether. The only reason they haven’t already is because there aren’t enough competent men to build the ships they need to transport tens of thousands of Sellswords our way. Or do you not care, here in the safety of eternal ice and snow?”

Jon cocks his head to the side and looks down at Tyrion thoughtfully,

“If you’re so certain that we need Daenerys Targaryen to come save us, again, why don’t you climb aboard the ship that brought you all the way up here, and ask her yourself?”

“Oh, something tells me that while neither of us has a stellar history with her, she still may find it more palatable to entertain such a request from a broody young man such as yourself.”

“Well why didn’t you say so!” Jon exclaims, sarcasm dripping from his voice, “I’ll just go over there and charm her into saving Westeros. Surely she won’t be able to resist. How ingenious!”

The corners of Tyrion’s mouth turn up in a smile against his will.

“I admit, I’ve had better ideas in my lifetime. But sometimes the best idea is by necessity the only idea we’ve got. We need her. You will go to Valyria, bend the knee, offer her Westeros on the condition that she controls the greedy bastards of Braavos, quells the Dornish rebellion, compels the Reach to produce food for the good of all of the Seven Kingdoms and sends a dragon or two to every corner of this land until the people understand that living in peace is preferable to unbridled hunger for power.”

“Oh, is that all?”

“It’s how peace is made, and divine providence has offered us an unlikely opportunity” Tyrion offers
meekly and the two are left staring at one another. Each wondering to what extent their past choices would continue to haunt them, and how old debts will be repaid.

“We weren’t wrong,” Tyrion says quietly, but forcefully.

Jon just looks at him, expressionless.

“I told you to ask me in ten years,” Tyrion continues but Jon cuts him off.

“I remember,” Jon says, “but if all you say is true, how could we have been anything but wrong?”

“Because you can only judge a man based on the times in which he is living.”

“Or a woman.” Jon supplies.

“It would appear so,” Tyrion agrees.
The ship carrying Grey Worm arrives in Valyria four months after she sets Daario off on his journey. There are about 70 Unsullied with him, unloading themselves and their supplies expertly, like men who had spent many days at sea. Daenerys waits for them on the shore and as Grey Worm approaches her, she can tell that he is taken aback by the difference in her appearance. Then he hears and sees Drogon roaring ahead and all the doubt is removed as he rushes to stand face to face with her.

“My Queen,” he says, his emotions threatening to spill over.

“Grey Worm,” she smiles at him warmly, the sort of smile that reaches all the way to her eyes, “it is good to see you, old friend.”

Over the next few days, Grey Worm explains to her how the first ship of Unsullied and Dothraki to reach Naath returned empty but for two men, the only two to survive the Butterfly Fever. They had still suffered from open wounds of combat when their ship landed and had stayed aboard. One dying Dothraki warrior stumbled back two days later, and they helped him lie down, brought him water and tended to him as best they could. The blood poured from his sweat pores and mixed freely with their open wounds. He died, they fell gravely ill, but recovered. Grey Worm ordered them back to land and waited a fortnight. They returned unafflicted.

“I need one man to give his life in the name of our Queen.” Grey Worm announced and waited at the helm. A dozen men rose, and he chose one at random to send ashore. They waited one sundown and then another, until the man returned in agony. Grey Worm drew a sharp blade from his side and cut a deep line in the forearm of each man aboard, ordering them to rub their bleeding wound against the body of the dying man. They did this ship, after ship, after ship. Some men were lost to the illness, but most survived.

The men then docked the ships and headed inland, urging the local people to return to the shores, promising protection from the slavers who had hunted them for centuries.

“The slave days are over. I declare it so by the grace of our Queen, Daenerys of the House Targaryen, the First of Her Name, The Unburnt, Queen of the Andals, the Rhoynar and the First
Men, Queen of Meereen, Khaleesi of the Great Grass Sea, Protector of the Realm, Lady Regent of the Seven Kingdoms, Breaker of Chains and Mother of Dragons.”

Grey Worm remembers that his voice was strong and authoritative but he also remembers feeling the corners of his eyes twitch with wetness and blinking it away. He omits these details when he recounts the story to her.

Daenerys’ forces stayed for two moons, brutally and forcefully quelling the slavers who dared to come at night, avoiding the butterflies, to steal children from their mothers and sell them for gold. The slavers would be captured and held until daylight, in the open meadow dotted with hundreds of purple coneflowers that attracted the butterflies. And they left them to die in the heat, then dragged their bodies to the sandy shore as a warning and reminder of the penalty for treating freedom like a commodity.

A small number of men was left behind, glorified by the people of Naath as their protectors, and Grey Worm led the rest to the rugged coast of Sothoryos.

“Do her people look like her?” Daenerys asked.

“Yes, my Queen,” Grey Worm tells her, and she does not press further. As difficult as it is for her to think of Missandei, it must be unspeakable for him.

Daenerys thinks that if somebody should write a tale of Naath someday, they would tell the story of a girl who became a slave, was freed only to die in chains, but whose death ultimately led to the eternal freedom of her people. It is almost poetic, whimsical even. One life given for the lives of many is what reason dictates, but it does little to alleviate her grief over her lost friend. Nor does it escape her that this is the same sort of validation that Jon would have used in driving a dagger through her own heart.

With Grey Worm back, Daenerys begins to feel more like her old self. The sparsely inhabited Valyria no longer seems so empty. The Unsullied make quick work of constructing sleeping and living quarters for themselves and a large, but non-intrusive home for their Queen.

“Lots of gold in Sothoryos. Stones too,” Grey Worm tells her during one of their informal planning sessions, as they walk through the gardens of her new home.
“Stones?”

“Gems. All colours. Under ground, they go dig them.”

He motions for one of the guards to join them and the man produces a small pouch made of snake skin. Daenerys holds out the palm of her hand and catches the sparkling gemstones as they spill from the pouch. The clear ones catch the sunlight and reflect all the colours of the rainbow as she rolls them between her fingertips gently. They are breathtaking.

“What do they people there want?”

“Salt. And cloth. But most of all, salt.”

“Half of the Grey Waste of Essos is a salt plain,” Daenerys notes immediately, “not too far beyond the Dothraki Sea.”

“We could bring to Asshai in wagons. Put on ships.” Grey Worm asserts.

“We don’t have enough horses, and that many Unsullied and Dothraki moving through Asshai would attract far too much attention,” she tells him, then grabs his arm, and points up at the sky where two dragons are flying overhead, the smaller one following the leader.

“I already have nearly 20 dragons. You will have to learn to ride, and we will transport the salt that way. It will spare our men and our ships and cut the time immensely. We will trade this salt for gold which we will take to Braavos. Build more ships, buy cloth to trade for more gold, rebuild Valyria. Daario will use the gold to build great armies in the Bay of Dragons and take them across Lhazar and the Red Waste until all the land between here and the Shadowlands is ours. When we have the greatest fleet that has sailed the seas, we will head further east and south and north.”

Her sense of confidence surprises and pleases her all at once.

“But first, we need the salt,” she concludes.

“Yes, my Queen.”
On the day that Grey Worm is to set sail back to Sothoryos, Daenerys breaks fast with him shortly after dawn. They are quiet and contemplative, dreading their impending separation but at the same time looking forward to what the future may bring.

“Before you go, I wanted to apologize to you for the orders I had given you on our last day in King’s Landing.”

“Queen don’t be sorry,” he tells her plainly.

“But I am,” she insists, “I want you to know that the burden of that day is for me to shoulder. You did as I asked.”

“Always will do as my Queen asks,” he promises and the simplicity of his loyalty seeps into the deepest recesses of her soul.

“You walked with me when the rest of the world walked out,” she tells him, covering his hand with hers, “and I shall never forget it.”

He nods his head in assent.

She watches him leave as the dragons shriek their goodbyes to her and set out to follow the ship. It is reminiscent of another time, and a new beginning all at once.
9 years 3 months after death

Chapter Notes

Thank you for following along. I guess we can start getting to the heart of the matter now. Hoping to update on Monday.

9 years, 3 months after death

He is brought into a courtyard in the middle of the day, the sun beating down at him and not a cloud in the sky to act as a shield. He can’t see the sea from where he is standing, but there is an unmistakable smell of salt in the air. His guard tells him that the Queen would see him when she was ready, no indication of whether that would be in 5 minutes or an hour, then disappears. He is surprised that they have left him alone given his history.

Jon has never been in a place this hot and beads of sweat appeared on his forehead almost instantly. There is a grove of trees lining one side of the courtyard, stretching as far as the eye could see, albeit from his limited vantage point. The trunks are knobby and knotted, the leaves long and narrow, dull except when they catch the sun at the right angle in which case they reflect a shiny, dark green colour. Olives, he thinks, not because he’s seen them before, but because he read about them once, when he was a boy whose stepmother hated him but not enough to want him to be embarrassingly stupid or unworldly. The inside of the stone fence is lined by shrubs and short trees with unusually beautiful flowers that seem mythological, like blooms from an alien landscape, with cone-like heads of long styles sticking up like pincushions. Pink, red, white, yellow, set in contrast against the foliage. Everything about this place gives the impression of life thriving spectacularly in a climate harsher than it appears at first glance. He notes the dustiness, for example, revealing a dry and barren landscape, and not at all the one spread out before him.

He walks the length of one wall, then another, wondering the entire time whether she chose to meet him out here where it was so bright that he’d no doubt have trouble seeing her without squinting, such a stark difference from the last time they stood opposite one another. Surrounded by overcast skies, the stench of corpses and the haze of ashes settling down. He is struck by how there were no reminders, not a single one, of that moment here, and yet all he can picture is her dying body, clad in black. He thinks about whether this is a twist of irony – that he managed to walk away alive and return to his home and the only place he’d felt free and unencumbered, with Ghost at his side and a clan of Wildlings who looked at him in admiration with not a hint of judgment, while her life came to an exceptionally violent end and yet here they are, all these years later. He, frozen in place, partly literally and fully figuratively, unable to move on from that day, unable to forget, or sleep an entire night through or forgive himself, and she, living here where life found a way to thrive in the dry cracks of limestone and volcanic rock. He plucks a yellow flower from one of the bushes, expecting that it would prick him, but it snaps off easily at the stem.
“Arlinia.” He hears her voice, startling him from behind, and he turns to face her, like an apparition. He doesn’t know from which side she entered. He doesn’t say anything because while he’s thought of this moment for the past year, every day, he’s speechless now. She comes to his rescue, not for the first time.

“It means ‘change’ in Old Valyrian. It’s named after a shape shifter, who could become just about anybody. When we see it opening up into a bloom, it transforms itself unexpectedly. Change, the only constant.”

That is what he thinks she said, and there may have been more, about the importance of the flowering plant to her people, about its hardiness and persistence, so much so that nobody cuts it down, because it comes back up. Always just a bit different. But he doesn’t know and can’t be sure because it feels like her words are just blowing in the light trade winds and all he can do is stare. She is tiny (still), beautiful (still), and looks a little older, but less than he’d expected. Her dress is flowy, silk and the colour of the sea that he’d seen on his way here. Her hair is platinum again, which is the thing that surprises him the most as Tyrion had described her as having a darker, starker look.

“More than nine years. Longer than the lifetime of some,” she continues when it becomes obvious that he’s at a loss for words. Has she been keeping count, all this time, he wonders. Does she have it down to the month, day, hour?

“Have you come to kill me?” He asks earnestly, almost stupidly, and he knows that if he ever lives to tell the story of their reunion, nobody will believe that these are the first words he spoke.

There is a slight curl of her mouth then, maybe he imagines it, because he knows that he never really knew her that well, yet he feels as if he can sense that she is at least slightly amused at his question.

“It seems to me that I should be asking you that question, no?”

“Dany,” he starts, but it feels wrong to breach lines of intimacy and besides, what could he say?

“We’re not alone,” she says with a wave of the hand, “you just don’t know it. You won’t get within a foot of me without losing your head. Sorcery and mystery abounds in this place, you never really get used to it, but you’re far from home now.”

“I’m not…I have no weapons. I come to you as I am,” he says, spreading open the palms of his hands as proof. The yellow flower falls to the ground, and she follows it with her gaze.
“A shadow of your former self,” she says, with just a hint of cruelty. He has not aged as well as she has, the journey has taken a lot out of him, and he knows that he appears a mess.

“The North is harsh,” he says, stupidly again and berates himself for his inability to formulate a coherent thought, much less express one.

“You have no business coming here, Jon Snow. Your ship is in the harbor, my people have not touched it. You should leave in two days’ time, after the storm passes.” He must look confused because she clarifies quickly, “Dragons, they tend to come back to land when the weather changes on a whim.”

“Your grace,” he starts to protest.

“You grace?” she shoots back in disbelief. It occurs to him a moment too late that addressing her in this way might offend her more than calling her by her first name.

“We could stand here for a lifetime and talk about what happened and it would never be enough, for either of us. When I first heard that you were here, that you were…alive, for certain, not just the rumors we’d all been hearing for years, I thought about what I would say or do, but I’m not smart enough, I’ve never been, it’s not why I’ve come…” he trails off.

“I should kill you,” she says thoughtfully, “in the name of justice, for myself. To make sure that you aren’t tempted to make the same poor decision twice in a lifetime. To send a message across the Godforsaken sea which you crossed, to every man, woman and child, that Daenerys Targaryen remembers, just as your North does.”

“I was ready,” he finds his voice again, “in front of Drogon, I wish that he’d done it then.”

“He’d be happy to oblige, if you insist. He’s much more imposing now, you may not even recognize him… go home,” she repeats.

Her tone is cold, which he’d expected. But it’s her detachment that shocks and stings him. That she doesn’t even feel passion enough to kill him, or have him beaten at least, or imprisoned, or tortured, or exiled forcefully. She certainly wants him gone, but appears unfazed by his appearance and unshaken by their history. Like he is just a man, from a long time ago, whom she’d always been indifferent about and whose presence imposes little more than a minor annoyance to her.
Two guards appear then and she speaks to them in a language that he doesn’t recognize, then leaves through the same gate that he had entered. Not a glance back at him, not any indication that seeing him was meaningful in any way.

They move him from the small room where he was originally held to a larger one, with windows open to a stunning coastline below. It’s not rocky like he’s used to, but smooth, white sand, with a hint of pink in the right light. He can’t see the harbor, so he knows he must be just north of it. The countryside is open with grove upon grove separated by roads that turn into viaducts over streams that spill into the sea. He always imagined this part of the world as a wasteland full of dragons and not much else, but everything is symmetrical, organized and more advanced than he’s used to.

Nobody speaks to him when his dinner is dropped off. It’s a rich, spiced fish broth and a bread that is sweeter and airier than he’s used to. There are green, leafy vegetables with grill marks on them, and a pungent odor. It’s edible, maybe even good, but leaves him hungry and wondering how Daenerys’ armies are sustained on this diet of bird food.

The sun sets quickly here, and the temperature becomes more pleasant. In his new room, he has access to a bath, though he only has the goblet water by his bed, which is cold. He washes up as well as he can, and then paces across the floor, considering his options. He can’t escape – there are men outside his room, and what is it that she said? Sorcery and mystery. And even if he did, what would be the purpose? She is letting him leave in any event. He desperately wants to speak with her, about the true purpose he’d come here for, but he has no idea how to find her, she has no interest in seeing him, and nobody in this place cares whether he stays alive.

He had told himself when he set out on this journey that he was doing it because he had to. Just like when winter was coming, he had no choice. He was willing to do what it took for the greater good. And she was his only hope, just like 9 years ago. He didn’t let his mind wander to the time they spent alone or to what they meant to one another, or the bloodline that they shared. He thought of it as a business proposition, he agreed with Tyrion that 9 years was a long enough time to conclude that she was a good ruler, a good Queen. That what happened in Kings Landing was out of character, maybe it was temporary madness due to circumstances. And that she’d want to take the ultimate throne and so they’d strike a deal and shake hands and things would proceed and bad blood forgotten, as they are when alliances are forged. But if he’s being honest with himself, he must admit that a small part of him had hoped, or relied, on whatever trace of goodwill was left toward him. People don’t always remember what you said or what you did, but they do remember the feelings you invoked in them. And so maybe she’d remember the way he looked at her a long time ago.

He realizes now how absurdly entitled that makes him sound and he’s ashamed that he’d thought so highly of himself that he actually imagined a woman like her could forgive the greatest betrayal
because a long time ago when they were barely older than children their fingers left burning trails on each other’s bodies.

In reality, it feels as if it’s as if it never happened.
9 years, 3 months, 1 day after death

Chapter Notes

Thank you so much to all who have left comments and have been following along. I appreciate it so very much. As a side note, those of you who have fic recommendations for me, please let me know in the comments as I need a pick me up! Thanks!

9 years, 3 months and 1 day after death

Daenerys finds it nearly impossible to get any rest the night after she comes face to face with Jon again. At first she can’t fall asleep, replaying their meeting in her head, over and over again. Questioning everything she said, her body language, even something as trite as the way her hair was styled that afternoon. Then she is haunted by peculiar dreams, the past mixed with the present, causing her to wake again and again, sitting up sharply each time taking a moment to wonder if the meeting itself was but part of a dream. Finally she can’t stand the restlessness and rises when it is still dark out, sits on the balcony of her chamber and breathes in the cool night air.

If she looks back, she is lost. But the past has made a return and she also knows that there is no moving forward without acknowledging it first. She is not a little girl anymore; she has to come to terms with her new reality with the grace and wisdom of a woman, not a child.

Jon is woken up early by the abrupt arrival of a diminutive woman appearing to be a chambermaid, who lays out clean clothes at the foot of his bed and sets a hot cup of herbal brew on the side table. She waves him over to the bath area and makes a grandiose point of turning a corkscrew until water pours out, splashing into a trough. He’s never seen anything like it and feels exceptionally stupid for washing up with drinking water last night. The maid says nothing to him and leaves as quickly as she appeared. He washes himself and dresses quickly, grateful to shed his filthy old clothes, though he feels strange donning the local garb and suppresses the thoughts about where he ultimately comes from.

Two men show up eventually and lead him down to the harbor where he is reunited with the sailors that accompanied him. They tell him that they’ve been provided with chambers in the inn, given Valyrian coins and fed. They speak of the city in awe, never having seen the architectural marvels of the spires that look like they could reach the heavens. They’ve also been told that they are to leave the next day and point to the ominous clouds gathering on the horizon. He assumes that he is to stay with them, but an impeccably dressed older woman, accompanied by four extraordinarily tall, dark men approaches in the early afternoon and instructs him to follow her to the palace where the Queen
is receiving visitors today.

He is led to a round building, adorned with semicircular arches, supported by rows of columns and featuring a hemispherical dome in the centre whose roof is a bright azure blue. The inside of the dome is intricately painted and caped with moldings. There are many windows built into the dome and the walls, flooding the inside with light.

There is a seat in the center that looks like a simple throne, but it is empty. He looks around and sees Daenerys standing by a window to his right. She sweeps a hand across the crystal-clear glass and turns to him.

“I was a child without a childhood. I think that I knew it at the time; there was always a longing for family, for a home, for something I’d lost even if I didn’t have memory of ever having it. But with age comes a certain wisdom about the things we seek and why we seek them at great cost. Maybe I was trying to recreate a better world, or maybe just a world where I’d be the one on top because I assumed that would assure me security, if nothing else.”

He doesn’t know why she has summoned him, but senses that she is willing to engage in conversation. It’s a start, he thinks to himself. He takes her in, a tiny woman with enormous presence standing mere feet from him. She is formal, but her shoulders are not aggressively tensed, like they would get when she was at her most combative. Strange that he remembers this aspect of her body so well.

“And now?” He finally asks, genuinely curious.

“And now? I’m comfortable. Right where I am,” she says pointedly.

“This is not your home,” he replies, not unkindly.

“And where is my home?” She challenges him, her tone sharpening. “Across the sea where the lot of you were all too happy to kill me, assume your thrones and your lands and live as if nothing had happened?”

“I won’t make excuses for myself. I don’t pride myself a great man, though I’m man enough to own what I’ve done. But the woman who sailed to Dragonstone was not the woman who died at King’s Landing.”
“Murdered. I was murdered at King’s Landing.”

“Aye,” he acknowledges, but continues to look her in the eye. He doesn’t know why. His shame is certainly deep enough, but he senses that if he looks away, he’ll lose what little respect she has left for him, or at least for the foolish part of him that traveled all this way.

“Why are you here, Jon Snow? Isn’t that the better question?”

“You met with Arya. You know the state of Westeros. You know the desperation. You know that all of Braavos is set to sail across the Narrow Sea the first chance they get because they sense weakness and they think that we’re theirs for the taking. And that we are not capable of mounting a defence.”

“Yes, I met with Arya. A surprise, I must say, for her and for me. I’d thought when we found Nysos that I’d gone to the end of the world, but it appears there is no way to rid myself of your family.”

A silence falls between them, as if she is daring him to say it, that Arya is not his family, that none of the Starks are. That his entire family sits across the table from him, by way of mercy alone. He doesn’t take the bait. He’s not here to trade insults or get into a debate of lineage and its pertinence. But he knows that it will linger in the air between them, so long as she allows him to breathe in her presence.

“You find yourself in Valyria, but in reality, your rule extends over all of Essos, over the cities of Sothoryos, the islands of Nysos, and maybe even beyond there. You have control over Braavos whether or not you sit in a throne there.”

“If you believe that to be the case, it is only because I have not meddled in the affairs of others as they do not concern me. You see, you can compel good behaviour with hundreds of dragons, when people realize that they want to live and love their children more than they hate their neighbours. So they work together, as best as they can figure out how, to build a future. They don’t do this because I stand guard over them as they rise in the morning and direct their daily business. They do it precisely because they know that they are free. But they also know that should they give in to their worst thoughts and impulses, I will appear from the heavens to bring about peace with fire and blood.”

It is in this moment that he realizes how much she has grown and aged. His thoughts of her were always limited to the short time they knew each other, and in his memories, she was the same young woman. But time does not stand still for anyone, and the woman who stands in front of him today is one he sometimes has trouble recognizing.
“Yet you have the largest army, you can call up on millions of men to join and make it bigger. You have the most ships, you have all the dragons. You have sorcery and mystery,” he quotes her.

“There is always the possibility that some weak-minded man across the Narrow Sea may be convinced that I am a threat,” she states pointedly, and they are left staring at each other. He allows himself to really look at her then. The golden sheen of her skin, darkened by all these years spent in the sun, her hair braided, but shorter than it used to be, her dress, a pale yellow colour today with beading at the shoulders, cut to her shape and clinging to her curves, but strategically showing very little skin on her chest. His own chest tightens when he thinks about why that is.

“I told you once, that we can only help people from a position of strength, do you remember that?” She asks, waking him from his reverie.

“Aye,” he nods, “and you certainly have strength now.”

“Didn’t I also tell you that sometimes strength is terrible?”

“It doesn’t have to be,” he counters. “Look at what you’ve built here. The people love you. There is peace, there is prosperity. It’s not perfect but it’s not the tragedy of…what happened over there,” he nods as if towards Westeros, though he has no idea which direction that is.

“When all my advisors told me to stay south, I flew beyond the wall to save you and your ill-fated attempt to pacify Cersei. As a result of that, I lost Viserion. When I wanted to remove the tyrant Cersei, I listened to you and waited, and helped you and your ungrateful sister save Winterfell at the expense of Jorah who was the first man to truly love me, and at the expense of most of my army which put their faith in me and crossed the sea into the unknown. Still that wasn’t enough for your sister or you, or anyone who heard that you were a Targaryen. I then lost Rhaegal, I was betrayed by Varys and by Tyrion, who chose a brother without a moral compass, a brother whom I’d saved by the exercise of mercy and as a means of making peace with your sister, despite my own misgivings. To say nothing of trying to save the sister who had been the primary cause of every war and conflict since the death of her husband. I saw my closest confidante beheaded and fall to her death in chains from which I’d liberated her years earlier.”

“I don’t dispute any of that,” he says truthfully, “you gave us everything when you owed us nothing, it is true.”

“But?” she prompts him, sensing there is more that he is holding back.
“But you burned all those people. Women, children, soldiers who had thrown their swords to the ground…” he says in a quiet, pleading voice.

“Something that I have had to die for and then live with forever,” she acknowledges before continuing, “and rather than flogging myself or living with regret, I have tried to save many more in the time that has passed. That has been my penance and I continue to pay it. Maybe a day will come when that debt is finally repaid in full. But let us be honest with each other, just one time. When did Varys declare me mad? When did your sister Sansa seek to have Tyrion rid her of me? When did you, all of you, decide that because I was mad, you would be the better king? It was well before I burned ‘all those people’, as you say.”

He looks down and he cannot argue with her. The moment that he asked Bran to reveal his lineage to Sansa and Arya was the moment that sealed Daenerys’ fate. It was the small-mindedness of men who were all too willing to set aside all that she had accomplished to replace her with a man who had no interest in ruling. He yearns to tell her that she doesn’t have to convince him that he’d done the wrong thing, having already concluded that himself a long time ago but he senses that there are things that must be said between them, in this moment, before any future can be contemplated.

“And all of you, every last man who had waged war or conspired to wage war and killed people deliberately or indiscriminately over the years concluded that I had to rule by mercy alone. Before I ever unleashed the fury that I can be judged for, I was evil and mad or perhaps both. Which conveniently left you as the one true heir to the throne.”

“I didn’t want it!” He exclaimed, “you know that.”

“You also didn’t want me,” she says, and it’s the first time he senses that this is personal. As it should be.

“Dany…” he trails off, wishing that he could cross the room and cup her face in his hand and wipe away the tears he imagines would come easily, “one minute I thought that we were all going to die. The next we were standing in the ashes of women and children and you didn’t care. And I wasn’t who I thought I was my entire life.”

“Your entire life was turned upside down. I can understand that better than most and whatever role I played in making that worse, I regret. But I cannot ignore that you conspired with Tyrion to murder your Queen. For that, you were allowed to live in the North which you love, with the people who love you and though this alleged exile was your punishment, here you are before me, a free man and a hero to your people.”
“I’m no hero,” he tells her, and she knows that he means it honestly.

“I’m not finished,” she says, “for that you got to live and be hero. When I lost everything and reacted emotionally because I had been betrayed or despised as little more than a foreign whore by all of you and turned to strength and power to put me where I rightfully belonged, for that my sentence was death.”

“I came to you, hoping that you could convince me that you knew what you did was a mistake, that you regretted it, that it wasn’t who you really were. And you spoke of conquering the world!” He says, desperately wishing that this rational woman had made an appearance among the ashes of King’s Landing so that none of what followed would have ever happened.

“And so I did conquer, according to you. Here, Sothoryos, Nysos. And now you want me to, what? Save you from the misery you inflicted upon yourselves?”

He can do little more but to stare at her, his eyes soft and pleading.

“Shall I fly over there with Drogon and burn the Prince of Dorne? A man that I have never met and who has declared no war on me and as far as I can tell has no designs beyond a slight expansion of his kingdom at the expense of yours. Is that what you would have me do?”

“No! I don’t have the right answers, but I want you to use your strength to protect us as you have done the people here. To build a better world, like you sought to do.”

“Your brother, I take it, was not the savior you were hoping for?”

“He wasn’t my brother,” he tells her, now that all the cards are on the table.

“And I am not your Queen.” She replies cuttingly, “that’s a fairly good summary of where we stand now, don’t you agree?”

“Shall I bend the knee to you? Again? Is that what you need, still? After all these years?” He found himself growing angry, knowing that he had no right to. He was in no position to ask her for anything and she was under no obligation to even tolerate his presence, much less entertain military proposals.
“I think that history has taught us both that would be meaningless.”

“Or you’re using history to justify the decision that you’ve already made.”

“I should have you beaten from my city!” She exclaims, and he senses her control is slipping. He’s not afraid of her, instead he feels badly, all of a sudden, that he’s walked in her and forced her to relive all that she’d left behind.

“Do with me what you must, but please go back to where you were born and usher in a new era like you said you would. Not because you owe it to us, but because it’s what you’ve done everywhere. For yourself if nobody else.”

“It is not what I do,” she insists, “not anymore. Your people seem to need to be ruled by a strong hand. Out here, we are free. And I have 800 dragons and many thousands of men to ensure that will always remain the case.”

“So, that’s it then? You’re going to be Cersei sitting in a tower while the world burns?”

“Your world,” she corrects him.

There was nothing that he could dispute in her words, and he began to realize that sometimes the damage done is so deep that it can’t be undone, even by way of the best intentions. He is an optimist at heart, and he even managed to convince himself that Tyrion was right, that every person had a price at which they were willing to negotiate and come to the table. But in the last 9 years, this was only the second moment that left him deflated to his core.

She must sense it because her body language softens, and a sense of calm takes over.

“I’m sorry that you’ve come all this way, Jon Snow. I know you well enough to know it would not have been your idea. If you wish to settle in Essos and live out your days in peace rather than go home, you will be met with no opposition and no hostility. There is no requirement to bend the knee here, we stand upright until we’re in the ground.”

It was an offer more generous than he deserved, and for a fleeting second, he even imagines it, living
under her rule, operating under romantic notions of redemption and what it could bring. When he descends back to reality he almost wishes that she hadn’t changed so much in her time, that she’d stayed the same girl who was not that hard to convince to join a good fight.

“I was,” she said, as if she read his mind, “I was that person, that’s the twist of fate that can save or end a life, isn’t it? I was the person who would have saved you before…everything. And now we’re just people who have vague memories of a time gone by, and of each other. I let you into my circle, into my bed…into my heart,” she says, and it burns him, the words, her look, that she’s no more than 10 feet away and he’ll never touch her again.

“And now,” she continues, “I’m the most powerful person in the known world with the ability to bring people to their knees in an instant, but I can’t give you what you want because some things cannot be given twice.”
9 years, 3 months and almost a week after death

Chapter Notes

I wanted to get this chapter out today even though I have not gotten started on the next one because I see this as the rock bottom. Angst has its place, but I am looking forward to the upswing. Nothing can get fixed instantly, but I see every chapter that will follow this one as part of the slow burn stage and I'm looking forward to it. One of the things I really hated about S8 is that neither of these characters were recognizable, and neither of them had any levity or sense of humor left. I look forward to building some of that back up.

Thank you for reading and commenting as always.

9 years, 3 months and almost a week after death

The day after the storm washes through is beautiful; the stifling heat is gone and the air is fresh.

Jon paces along the harbor watches the ships coming in and out. The fishing boats are buzzing, fishermen eager to get out after being stuck on land the last 24 hours. Every once in a while, a dragon flies ahead and he wonders where they all stay and whether they are organized into families with a leader. They appear to be part of everyday life here, and nobody except him is startled by their sounds or pays them any special attention. He thinks back to the first time he saw a dragon and nearly found himself face flat in the ground out of fear.

There is a large stone staircase that leads to the central portion of the docks and he hears the commotion before he sees her coming. The sun is behind her when she stands at the very top of the stairs, so her features are obscured but her body looks like it is glowing. Fitting, for a woman who can walk through fire, he thinks. As she makes her way down, their eyes meet, and he wishes that the Gods could wipe away their past and their memories so that he could be enchanted by her all over again.

“I don’t want to leave,” he says when she arrives with at least a dozen men trailing her, to formally bid him goodbye.

She pulls her head back ever so slightly in surprise.

“I meant what I said, you are free to remain in Essos,” she says carefully.
“No…I don’t want to stay here. I just don’t want to go back…yet.”

He sees the storm brewing in her eyes as she steps forward, away from the group accompanying her and speaks to him in a low, quiet voice.

“Is this a game to you?” She asks. “Do you think that if you stay here and I entertain your presence for a few minutes now and then, that one day the past will be erased, swept up by the wind gathering dust and my disposition will change?’”

“No,” he answers honestly, “I don’t know why I stay except that it’s a chance that I never thought I’d have again.”

“And?” She pushes back.

“And I believe that in your heart, you still want make this a better world, for all of us, even the undeserving.”

She looks up at the heavens, as if she is counting to a hundred while she waits for her blood to stop boiling, and then takes a long and steadying breath. She lowers her eyes, meets his and walks away without saying another word.

He is left standing with his sailors, without a clue as to what he is supposed to do now.

She is infuriated by him as she scales the multitude of steps back to the throne room. She curses herself for building towers and spires instead of single-level structures that wouldn’t leave her out of breath a dozen times a day. The huffing and puffing as she climbs only stoke the fire of her anger.

“The gall of that man,” she says under her breath, to no one in particular.

She is of half the mind to summon Grey Worm and have him serve Jon’s head on a platter, as the loyal soldier would do without question and with more than a little satisfaction after all these years.
Even she might get just an ounce of pleasure out of it, she thinks angrily.

He doesn’t understand anything, he doesn’t know anything, her rational side tells her. He was not here in the beginning, when she was alive but dead on the inside, counting the minutes until the sun would rise because while the days were hard, the nights were nearly impossible. All he sees is a Queen standing before him in glory, and he has no comprehension of the complexity of the woman inside. In fairness to him, it is all she has allowed him to see. And people are quick to forget the pain of the past when the present is bright. Otherwise, nobody would have more than one child, she thinks to herself with a hint of bitterness.

Showing him anything other than the extent of her strength would leave her vulnerable and she isn’t certain that she is ready to re-live the pain of the past, much less right before his eyes. How she wishes that Ser Jorah was still alive. It would have killed him to advise her on the matters of the heart when it comes to Jon Snow, but he would have done it valiantly and that just may be the truest measure of a man.

All she has now is her own sense of judgment of what is right and wrong.

An older woman whom he has seen in Daenerys’ service several times before eventually comes to his ship in the late evening and orders him back to his quarters in the palace. Except that he does not return to his chamber, but a new, larger one, in a different wing altogether. He guesses that this is where her invited guests typically stay, given the number of staff and the opulence of the accommodations. He thinks back to her threat of beating him out of her city and cannot help but laugh at the sudden and complete change of heart.

He is served a cold and floral tea with a small loaf of sweet bread and a fruity spread. He has always equated wealth with the access to sugar, so he takes this as yet another sign that he has somehow been upgraded in her eyes. For what reason, he does not know.

She arrives as he is finishing his meal, walks through his doors unannounced, which almost makes him chuckle. The disregard for his privacy makes him feel better somehow, at least he can understand the whiff of rudeness that remains directed towards him. She also leaves the door open but orders her men to remain in the hall. The chamber is large enough that their conversation may as well be private.

“I trusted you almost immediately. Probably because I was in love with you.” She says plainly, surprising him, before she continues, “I had never done so with a man before, do you know that? I was hesitant, suspicious, and rightly so, as it turns out. The one time I wasn’t, I died.”
She laughs then and for a moment he flashes back to the last time he spoke with Varys, to the implications of madness. Except her laugh isn’t mad or disturbing, it’s rueful.

“It sounds absurd, doesn’t it?” She asks him, not expecting an answer. “Because it is absurd. People don’t die to get brought back, but here we are nevertheless.”

An uneasy silence falls on them.

“Why did the Lord of Light bring you back? Have you thought about it?” Jon asks after an awkwardly long moment.

“Why can’t we see to the end of the known world, when we look out there?” She fires back and he doesn’t know how to answer, so he waits, for what seems like the millionth time, for direction.

“Look,” she points to the line where the sea meets the sky, “why is there a line? Shouldn’t it keep going as far as the eye can see? But it doesn’t. The Vlaii told me why,” she admits, “it’s because the world is round, like the sun and the moon. We can’t see around the bend. It’s how we found Nysos – we sailed east of Essos and it wasn’t very far. Your sister, Arya, came from the other direction.”

“I’m sorry but what does this have to do with the Lord of Light?” He asks, feeling like he did the first time he ever met her, as if she was always a step ahead.

“I didn’t know that the world was round until I sought to know why we couldn’t see all the way. I didn’t know why Kinvara brought me back until I saw the new Essos rise. More children have been born than have died under my rule. I’ve played my part in the game, Jon Snow.”

“And if there is more to it than that? If he brought you back because when I killed you, it was a mistake?”

When he looks at her then, she is reminded of the old Jon Snow, who was awed and impressed by her and who had a childish hope about him. She unclenches her right hand, which had balled into a fist without her even noticing it, and slowly, deliberately unclips the dress gathered at her left shoulder. His eyes are wild, and his heart is beating so loudly that he thinks she must hear it. There has been nothing between them, not so much an accidental touch, and she’s looked at him with a mixture of annoyance, contempt and indifference the entire time he’s been here.
The dress comes undone and she lets it drop over her left breast before she catches the silky fabric in her other hand. His eyes go to the red scar and he swallows hard, as if his throat is filled with metal balls, sharp, heavy and unforgiving. He knows that he has to keep his eyes on it, on her and not betray his feelings because she will think that he finds her ugly when the only person who makes him sick in this moment is himself. After a minute she pulls her dress back up, adjusts it and walks out of his room without saying another word.

He runs to the bathing trough then and vomits over and over again, until there is nothing left but bitter yellow bile running out of his mouth.

She says nothing to him of their prior interaction when he next sees her. It is early morning and he finds himself standing just outside the city gates, having been brought there on horseback. She stands in a field stroking the head of an impressively sized dragon while Drogon looks on passively. The enormity of their size shocks Jon, who has never seen dragons larger than the size Drogon was nine years ago. The smaller dragon is much larger than Drogon was back then, and Drogon himself is even bigger. He begins to understand how she rose to the top with relatively little bloodshed in the process – only madmen would rise against her if she has hundreds of these beasts standing behind her.

She meets his eyes only long enough to acknowledge his presence, then turns to provide what he assumes are detailed orders to one of the men accompanying her. He proceeds to affix several sacks to the back of a much smaller, third dragon that lands on the ground with the usual flair and thunder of his species. Jon thinks to himself that he has to learn this tongue, or at least enough of it to have a basic understanding of what is unfolding before him.

“Provisions,” she explains, “for a brief journey. I would like you to accompany me.”

“Where?”

“Volantis,” is all she says before she climbs on Drogon.

She watches him, her eyes all but daring him to get on a dragon he’s never seen before. He swallows hard and approaches the animal who watches him with a healthy dose of suspicion and doubt.
“I’ll just hang on for dear life now,” Jon tells the dragon under his breath and climbs on his back, awkwardly pulling himself up by the scales.

“His name is Orion,” Daenerys says before taking off.

He is your blood, she tells herself. That’s why he hasn’t been burned to a crisp by Orion, whose temper has only gotten sharper as he’s matured. She is uneasy about that fact, not because it disturbs her personally but because it was the basis of their downfall and something that remains unresolved. She doubts that Jon has come to true acceptance living in near isolation all these years. And yet he belongs on the back of that dragon, no less than she does.

In Volantis, she leads him to Kinvara, who waits for them expectantly on the same stone bench where Daenerys bid her goodbye.

“The flames danced and in their flicker, I have seen this meeting many times. I have waited, quite a while.”

Daenerys is relieved that the future has been foretold as it allows her to be a passive spectator now. She turns to Jon who is visibly confused about why they are there, why she’s brought him with her anywhere at all, and what will happen next.

“Come with me, Jon Snow,” Kinvara motions and the two walk down a neat stone path that is criss-crossed by sturdy vines with small green leaves and tiny beige tubules.

Daenerys takes a seat on the stone bench and grasps its sides until her knuckles turn white. She feels lightheaded remembering this place and what happened here when the priestesses brought her back to life. She watches the two figures get further away and she can’t hear their conversation, but body language is an excellent proxy, and in most cases a more honest way of revealing what is really happening.

She watches as Jon stops dead in his tracks, hunching over slightly, his palms flat against his thighs so as to brace himself against falling over. He turns back to look at her, and while he is too far for her to see the expression on his face, she can sense the anguish in his eyes. There is a (not so) small part of her that aches to offer him comfort, to divide the grief between them but she just doesn’t have the wherewithal to move. So she sits and waits.
Kinvara walks back first and stops briefly in front of her.

“You have manifested peace all you have done since you left us. This has pleased the Lord of Light but you must know that true peace comes from the inside. The first step is to start. The last step is to go all the way.”

Her voice is kind, but her gaze is intense before she goes back inside the house built adjacent to the temple.

When Jon eventually walks back over to her, she is met with a face streaked with tears and the posture of a broken man. She immediately questions whether she ever should have told him any of this at all an wonders the purpose of it all.

“Did you know? Before?” He asks her, eyes pleading.

“I did not,” she says truthfully, “I have tried to think back to the signs, but I can’t identify any. Maybe it was the stress of war and death…everything is a blur. It is my fault; I had been pregnant before, I should have known.”

“It’s not your fault,” he says. “For once in your life, allow me to win an argument without a fight.”

It is unimaginable, he thinks. All of it. He hopes that she will have her dragons turn and deliver him from his suffering because surely as long as he lives he will never forgive himself or manage to survive this. Only a monster could find a means to go on after killing his own child, he thinks.

“Would it have changed anything?” She asks him gently.

“What? Would it…everything! It would have changed everything,” he emphasizes, “please tell me that you at least have enough faith in me to believe that much.”

It is a long pause before she nods wordlessly.
“I told myself that I wanted you to go to Volantis and find out about our daughter the way that I did – in a strange place, from a stranger. And then to have to leave her and all of it behind. To understand what it was like to breathe after that, to wake every morning and wonder how everyone else managed to rise and go about their day when your entire world had ended. To learn to live again while carrying that knowledge. It has been more than nine long years, and I told myself that I wanted you to suffer the way that I did, that the only way you could truly come to understand who I am today is if you shared that experience.”

He stares at her in anguish and thinks nothing. He has always been the quiet sort, living inside his head, the wheels spinning their thoughts endlessly. This is the first time in his life that he thinks nothing. It’s just a void of emptiness like his heart.

“But ultimately I didn’t have the red priestess tell you because I wanted to hurt you. I did it because I had to be strong enough for myself, and I don’t have strength left for both of us. I simply could not bring myself to say it,” she admits.

“I want to go back in time, I would give my life to go back in time, without a moment of hesitation,” he says convincingly, and she believes him.

She sighs and slides down, leaving room for him next to her on the stone bench. He sits, and they watch the sun go down on the horizon.

When they return to Valyria the following day, she walks back with him to his chamber and enters then shuts the door, it is the first and only time they have been afforded privacy in his quarters during his stay in Valyria. She remains close to the door and watches him collapse into the nearest chair.

“You need to take some time,” she says quietly, “but I regret to have to tell you that nearly a decade later and I have not truly accepted it. I have a recurring dream, of a candle that flickers, as if there is a slight breeze blowing from a nearby window. And I try to reach for it, so I could cup my hands around the fragile flame and protect it, but it always goes out before I can get there. That is what living life carrying around this pain feels like.”

She crosses the room to stand closer to him than she’s ever stood and lays her warm hand on his shoulder, giving it a small squeeze.

“I spent so many years being angry, it was eating me alive. And my fury could never bring her back.
I’m tired of being angry.” she tells him.

It is almost perverse that she finds herself comforting him in this moment, when he is the cause of this loss and when she has had to carry this grief on her own for a lifetime since. But whatever part of her heart was his once upon a time wins the battle in her internal struggle and she can’t find it within her to be cruel to him intentionally. She will surely curse her weak resolve later, but in the moment, she feels the small touch is right.

His bloodshot, wet eyes look up at her but she walks away before either of them has a chance to make things any better or any worse.
Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

I was "lucky" to be on a flight to some meetings so I had time to ruminate and finish this chapter. Special thank you to all those leaving such nice comments. :) 

No sleep comes to him the night that they return to Valyria. He is restless and agitated and feels like a caged animal in his chamber though he is free to come and go as he pleases. The night feels endless and he would beg morning to come but he doesn’t care enough to bother.

He feels like he’s holding a white flag in his fist, eager to wave it in surrender. *Enough of this life!* He thinks he has had enough, he’s lived enough, he’s made one too many a wrong decision and he’s ready to give up now.

Who would even miss him?

Daenerys sits alone in her dining room on the morning of the second day, and has his meal sent to his room by her most senior servant. She is told that he does not touch it. Nor does he touch his mid-day meal or his supper.

*He will not starve to death. It is normal. You didn’t eat for nearly a week,* she tells herself. Nevertheless, it nags at her, his absence, his obvious inner torment. And it eats away at her as well, almost as if she is living her own anguish all over again. But she made a mistake of pushing him to face his inner demons too soon once in her life and paid a terrible price for it. She will not do it again.

On the third day, he realizes that he has not eaten anything the previous two days. He doesn’t feel hungry, but he finds himself so weak when he stands up that he instinctively reaches for the porridge left in the same place as all his meals had been for days. He stifles the urge to vomit and purge the contents of his stomach after, though the food does not sit well with him.

He feels like he is living through a mental fog and it is difficult to string coherent thoughts together.
The tears continue to come, surprising him with their insistence and urgency. Just as he wipes his eyes, they come again, spilling over his cheeks.

The guilt is overwhelming, and he feels guilty about that too, so he tries to concentrate on his sorrow instead, so as to make his suffering more selfless.

He wonders if Daenerys has noted his absence.

On the fourth day, he starts to talk to his daughter, the child that never was. He says sorry a million times and assures her that he loved her mother deeply and saw a world of potential in her but that he was stupid and wrong. He tells her about the happiest memories of his childhood in Winterfell. The first memory he has, his small hand in Ned’s large, calloused one as they stood watching the first snowfall of winter when he was 4 years old. The first time he got to hold a real sword, and how natural it felt in his hands even though it was so much heavier than his toy wooden one that he’d wielded with ease. The first horse that was his, just his, and how he was shown by the stable boys to trim his hooves in winter when they did not get adequate war and how proudly he was to don his first grooming mitt and run the comb through his mane and tail so gently. Running through the woods with Robb, who was always slightly faster than him. The day that Arya was born and how she had opened her eyes immediately when he offered her his index finger to hold and the inseparable bond that would follow.

He tells these tales until the sun goes down and he starts to think that he is losing his mind.

On the fifth day, he punches the wall of his chamber until the knuckles of his right hand are bloodied, then holds his hand under the corkscrew tap until the cold water renders it numb, mirroring how he feels inside. The tears are starting to abate, whether as a result of dehydration or exhaustion, he doesn’t know. The sadness and guilt continue to gnaw at his insides.

_How did she survive this?_ He wonders. On the heels of betrayal, all on her own, and it happened to her body. In a strange place with no reminders of home and no hope of a future. How did she rise from bed in the morning? How did she gather the strength to go on? How did she care enough about the world still to go about rebuilding it?
How can anyone survive this? But she did. She did.

It gives him pause.

On the sixth day, he starts to grow tired of his chamber. He spends a long time in front of the window, looking out at the boats and ships close to the shore and further out on the horizon. He thinks about how there is no end to the sea or its waves. They come and go only to come again. He observes the wild flowers hanging in baskets from the palace windows and how they turn eagerly towards the sun, then bend in the evenings as if resting before a new day arrives. Life finds a way, he thinks again.

He thinks about the hungry children of the North, and the ones growing up with violence in the South. This cannot be our fate, he thinks. Valyria is a testament to the ability to survive even the greatest of tragedies and turn it into something positive. Give meaning to one’s life.

But there is more to his tragedy than the outcome of Westeros. He has lived his life with the goal of duty as his paramount guide. It’s what has allowed him to put aside his own needs and desires, and it strikes him now how heavily that has been weighing him down. The weight of the world’s expectations, the disregard for his own happiness. No more, he promises himself. While may be too soon to sort out the complexity of feelings he has for Dany, he is suddenly acutely aware of the sense of responsibility he bears towards her and accepts that he will never manage to fulfill it if he throws his life away.

There is nothing he can do to change his situation. He cannot pull the dagger from her heart anymore than he can revive his child. He cannot erase the last 9 years, or the year that preceded it. He cannot bring back his parents or Ned Stark or Ghost or anyone else who has passed on. He cannot have a redo of his reunion with Dany and he certainly cannot control how she feels about him. All those things have come and passed.

But in letting him know the whole truth, she has set him free and given him a second, or third, chance at life; this one with the benefit of foresight. He cannot change his situation, but perhaps he could change himself.

On the seventh day, he rises before the bright rays of the sun dawn on him. He bursts into the hallway and walks aimlessly around a still unfamiliar place, searching for whatever soul will cross...
his path first. He finally finds one of the kitchen maids who does not understand the common tongue, but he somehow manages to ask that a bath please be drawn for him. It strikes him later, when he takes a better look at himself that the girl surmised what he wanted by his appearance and not his words.

He waits as two servant girls go about setting up the bath in his chamber and the moment they are gone, he sits in the warm, bubbly suds then slowly slides down until he is underwater, lying flat on his back. He opens his eyes and they sting from the soap and the heat as he lets his breath out through his nose, then follows the bubbles as they rise to the surface. Pop. Pop. Pop. One by one, and they are free once again.

He sits up sharply, breathless, and the water sloshes over the sides of the bath tub, on the floor. For a moment he thinks that he is so aware of his surroundings that he can hear each drop as it falls and flattens against the ground.

The cool linen feels rough against his skin as he wipes himself dry, then does the same to his hair that spills carelessly across the nape of his neck and bounces. He trims his beard until it is much shorter and neater than it had been in weeks.

He reaches for the clean clothes laid out for him on a stool near the bath tub and dresses himself.

It is a long walk down to the dining room where Daenerys always breaks her morning fast, but he feels as if today he is floating. He notices the nuance of every painted wall he passes, the clean lines of the doorway arches, the lattice of carved stone leaves in the dome of the central hall, like a stylized crown of foliage at the top of a tree meant to be breaking through the ceiling.

When he opens the heavy wooden double doors of the dining room, she all but jumps in her seat, growing accustomed to not expecting him. He knows that his face bears the strain of exhaustion and sleeplessness, but he nevertheless manages to greet her with a smile.

“Good morning, Your Grace,” he says.

He feels alive.
Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

Uncharacteristically of how I tend to approach my writing (I don't want to direct it and tell you how to read a story), I wanted to comment on the previous chapter. I drew inspiration from the story of King David - the idea that you mourn the dead and concentrate your grief, but when they are buried and gone, the living must go on with life. This is not to say you ever get over it, just that you have to find a means to survive it, and hopefully in a way that allows you to continue to grow as a person.

Onward...

9 years, 3 months, 17 days after death

She had been told by the maids that he was eating and requested a bath, so on some level she was expecting him make an appearance soon, yet she is almost too dumbfounded to speak.

He has visibly lost weight, from the stress and fasting, but his eyes are bright in a way she has not seen them since his arrival.

“Thank you for being honest with me; I know it must have been difficult.”

“The right thing is often the hard thing,” She replies.

He elects to stand, as it makes him feel more certain in what he is about to say. Besides, he is too jumpy and nervous to be confined to a chair.

“I have been thinking, I’ve been doing nothing but thinking and you are right – I cannot ask you to go back to Westeros. It isn’t right, it puts your life in danger, and it goes against everything that you’ve painstakingly built here.”

“Thank you,” she says after a long moment passes, surprised by what he has concluded. Of all the ways she imagined this conversation could evolve, this is one of the least likely scenarios.
“I am also embarrassed, to tell the truth, that I have been so weak. Who would respect such a man?”

She says nothing, letting him go on.

“I think that I was so singularly focussed, obsessed even, on the Night King and his army of the dead that I missed a great many things. I did not stop and think about what you were trying to accomplish unrelated to that great fight. I put aside the threat of Cersei and even managed to put aside her killing the man that I thought was my father. I gave no thought to what would come after the great war was won, perhaps because I didn’t really believe that it could be won. After we burned the dead on the pyres at Winterfell, I stumbled about like a blind man. My war, the war I had been preparing for was over, in the blink of an eye with me almost a passenger sitting in the back of a carriage, having no control over the ride. I was left without a clue, a plan, or a notion of what to do next.”

“You had promised me your alliance, and your aid in fighting Cersei,” she reminds him.

“Aye, and I followed through but my heart was not in it,” he says, studying her reaction before continuing with a potentially dangerous topic, “and you came to me several times, begging me to not let things change for us but I met you with indifference and I don’t really know why,” he admits.

“You were repulsed that we were relations,” she guesses, and he senses bitterness there, though he can tell that she is trying to push it down in an effort to maintain this discussion as business-like as possible.

“I don’t think that I really was…but I thought that I should be. It is as if I started to live my life through the looking glass, asking myself what I should do or feel rather than questioning what I wanted to do and how I felt. Then I continued to do the same here, having learned nothing. I came to beg you for aid because I thought that I should, armed with the arrogance of a man who thought that if he asked, you would oblige because the heart remembers. By why would you? I would have no respect for me either, if I were you.” He says.

“So…what now?” She is truly curious.

“So now I get up and start acting like a man. I will welcome death one day if it means that I will have the chance to meet my child and beg her for forgiveness. I will mourn her every day until that day comes and I will express my regret to you at every opportunity that you may allow. But I am no good to anyone wallowing in despair, so I will pick myself up and finally do something rather than sit and wait for life to happen to me. But to do that, I still need your help.”
“My help to do what, exactly?” She presses without offering a hint of her disposition in the tone of her voice or her body language.

“I would ask you to call off Braavos. Order them to halt their plans, release their sellswords and stay here in Essos where they belong. I will sail back to Westeros and fight to unite the kingdoms for their sake, but in your name. I will remove the corrupt Lords, peacefully or otherwise and stem the open rebellions.”

“And with what armies to you propose to do so?” She wonders pointedly.

“Aye, that is a problem,” he recognizes, “and if you have men and ships to spare, even a small number, I would be much obliged. The North will follow me because the Stark name will alone will always be compelling, except the people are weary and tired of war and convincing them to join in battles far from home will not be an easy task. The Free Folk will follow me because of the bond I have forged for them, but they are few in number and not sufficient, not even close.”

“Why would they even fight in the south? With the Night King gone, they have no incentive but to stay put. Their way of life is not threatened by the machinations of the seven kingdoms, none of which has any interest in the frozen wasteland north of the Wall.”

“Because as much as the Wall kept the Night King out, it turns out that it also served another purpose – to keep the animals in. They have been migrating south in search of food and the making the already difficult lives of the Free Folk that much worse. The men will come down and fight if they are promised some more hospitable lands in the North where they could settle and have the freedom to roam when the wars are over. The North is so vast that you could easily grant them this without having to strike costly bargains with the Northern Houses.”

She realizes that she knows very little about the situation beyond the Wall and Jon’s arguments are compelling so she tells him as much. He knows the lands and the people better than she ever will, and she is not stubborn or stupid enough to claim otherwise.

“Thank you, Your Grace,” He says simply.

“And what of the years to follow?”

“I’m sorry?” He asks, not fully understanding her question.
“If you succeed, somebody must rise to the throne. It is clear that Westeros cannot govern except if it is united. But for that, you need a competent ruler. I have no intention of being that ruler, but I suppose you will tell me that you do?”

“My intention is not to convince you to make me King. I never wanted to rule over anything at all.”

“Be that as it may, if you lead the men into battle, and build political alliances that will support you, how can there be any other outcome except that it all becomes your kingdom? And are we not then left with the same predicament? That your claim to the throne is, in fact, better than mine?”

“Fuck the claim on the throne!” He exclaims, “That’s just all bullshit. You do not rule here or anywhere else because of your name. What does some savage in Sothoryos care about the dynasties of our families? But you are still their Queen.”

“The people of Westeros, however, do care,” She points out and they find themselves at a standstill.

“I will fly your banners. I will not enter into an alliance with any House which does not recognize you as the Queen of the Realm. And I will bend the knee to you, whether you require it or not, so that you understand, at least as between the two of us, that I will not allow harm to come your way, ever again.”

His sincerity starts to weaken her resolve but she knows that it would be foolish to decide on a course of action until she has properly weighed the benefits and the drawbacks.

“I will consider your proposal, Jon Snow. You will join me at supper tomorrow, and I will advise you of my decision at that time.”

He is surprised to be dismissed so summarily, and in such a perfunctory tone. Even if he were a betting man, he could not even hazard a guess as to which way the wind will blow when it comes to this matter.

As she watches him leave the room, Daenerys lets out a long breath that she didn’t know she had been holding. She walks up and down, studying the frescos on the walls which depict maps of all the kingdoms which she rules. There is one notable one missing, she has always deliberately had the painters omit it as she wanted neither a reminder nor a temptation.
Do not think of just the cost, think also of the opportunity, she tells herself. She has learned never to commit to an important course of action in the moment, when emotions are running high. She begins to work her way down his list of requests. The Braavosi would do as she asks, although she may have to pacify them in some way given the costs they have incurred on a planned invasion. Their goal has always been to be the seat of wealth, and there are trade routes that would likely be enticing enough. She certainly has more than enough men to spare, and her enormous fleets control the seas; sparing a few ships would go unnoticed, and she could order the ship builders to have them replaced, which would boost their profits and offer the tradesmen new jobs. She has had to learn the ways of business and profit, and that good deals are good because everybody is better off as a result.

And he is my blood, after all. At some point, somebody will rule over all of Westeros, she knows this much to be true. If it has to be someone, why not the only other Targaryen left in the world? Particularly one who feels indebted to her.

He enters the room and takes a seat at one end of a table meant to seat 10 or 12 people, where a place setting indicates he belongs. Daenerys is already seated at the other end, directly opposite him. She is wearing a deep crimson dress, more form fitting than usual but he has become accustomed to controlling his gaze and not allowing it to linger…too long.

There are three servants in the room – two handling food and one pouring drinks. They do not leave for the duration of the meal, though he does not find them particularly intrusive given that there is no conversation flowing.

Jon has been in Valyria long enough now to recognize that this is her place, and everyone plays by her rules. So he waits for her to take the lead. And once the food is cleared away she does, wasting no time on small talk.

“I will provide you with 15,000 men, half on horseback, and the ships you will need to transport them across the Narrow Sea. In addition, you will take Orion and 4 other dragons which are battle-tested and who are trained to follow Orion’s lead. You will find that most people will find them extraordinarily persuasive merely by way of their presence.”

“You would trust me with them?” He is incredulous.

“You have a terrible sense of politics or the machinations of men who operate in the shadows. But you are a good commander, and I don’t expect a great many losses. Should some fool in Westeros
decide that declaring war on one of my dragons is in their best interest, do make clear that there is only one way their story can end.”

“I hoped for your support, but I did not expect all this,” Jon admits.

Daenerys continues, keeping the pace at a good clip.

“You may be called the King of Westeros, if you wish, but I shall always be the Queen of the Realm and you will submit to my rule and you will make it perfectly clear to every Lord and peasant on that side of the Sea to whom they owe their lives.”

He is left staring at her, having come armed for a long and drawn out fight and instead she has given him all he has asked for and considerably more.

“A simple thank you will suffice,” she says after she grows tired of the way he is gaping at her.

“Thank you.” It rolls of his tongue effortlessly. When she does not say another word, he stands up to leave, assuming that her silence indicates she has dismissed him, but she speaks again as soon as he rises to his feet.

“You shall have all these, on four conditions,” she clarifies.

“First, your sister Sansa will not be Queen in the North. There will be no independent North.”

“Dany…” he starts to protest, albeit weakly.

“If at some point during the course of this conversation I gave you the impression that any of my terms are subject to negotiation, I apologize for being unclear,” she says curtly.

“The North has existed with at least some level of sovereignty before. It is of no threat and of even less consequence to you if they continue in that manner,” he says in a more authoritative tone, sensing that her level of respect for him is tied directly to her perception of his confidence.
“The North,” she says slowly, “cannot feed itself. It cannot trade for enough food either because it has nothing to offer its neighbours. For thousands of years, you were the bulwark of civilization, holding back the Night King and the White Walkers. Ironically, once he was disposed of, the North’s value diminished to almost nothing. You were better off when he loomed beyond the Wall.”

He takes a long breath as he considers her words. He starts to think that the unintended consequences of winning the great war will continue to haunt him for the rest of his days.

“What else?” He finally asks when he sees that her stance is unyielding.

“Tyrion Lannister cannot be your Hand.”

“Having witnessed the counsel he gave to you, I don’t believe this to be a major issue,” he tells her dryly.

“Not my finest moment,” she agrees, and allows for some levity.

“Do understand that I don’t think him to be a man of poor character,” Jon adds and she does not dispute it.

“That’s fair, though not particularly relevant,” she remarks then continues as if crossing off an invisible list, “Third, Yara Greyjoy.”

“What about her?”

“I liked her. And she got on with me. She doesn’t strike me as a woman whose beliefs or character are subject to great change, so I assume I would like her still today. You will take her on as your military commander, provided that she accepts.”

His hands go to his hips, readying for an argument.

“With all due respect, I do not need a military commander.”
“No, you don’t,” Daenerys agrees, “but you have proposed to lead. You do not lead with a sword on the battlefield knee deep in mud, a lesson that may not come naturally to you, but must come nevertheless. If you are to lead Westeros, on my behalf, you cannot be weighed down by the minutiae of battle planning.”

“I do not intend to hide behind my men while they die for me!” He insists and she knows that he feels strongly about this, and isn’t simply being petulant for the sake of petulance.

“Oh for god’s sake, nobody is asking you to camp out in the crypts,” she says and they both know to whom she is referring.

“It certainly sounds like it.”

“You may hold all of this,” she motions at the grand room in the palace, “in contempt, as if you are somehow above the banalities of holding court and overseeing the spending of coin. But wars end and after them, hopefully a long peace follows. You have to embrace the politics of it, whether it suits you or not.”

“And you think that Yara is the right person based on?”

“A number of things, and it helps that she will be one of the few women on that side of the Narrow Sea who won’t be taken by the curly mop on your head,” she says.

He wonders if she is judging herself with this comment that cuts him more deeply than it should.

“And the last one?” He asks.

“The Sellsword, Bronn. How it was decided to put a man who knows of little more than whores and ale in control of your coin is beyond the scope of my, or any thinking person’s understanding. Of all the foolish things that were done – and to be certain, there were many – this one may be the worst. You will have him removed immediately.”

“Fair,” Jon observes, feeling no great charity towards the man.

“And one more thing – I know that you shall feel duty and honour bound to dispense with Sansa and Tyrion in a way that you think appropriate. As vexing as it may be to me personally, I am willing to
extend you the liberty of doing so. I feel no such charity towards the Sellsword; if you fail to remove him promptly, I will arrange it to be done, in whatever way pleases me on the day in question.”

He watches her deliver the thinly veiled threat with such clarity and ease that he finally fully understands how she came to rule nearly the entire world.

“Do we have an understanding?” She prompts him.

“Aye, we do.”

“Very well,” she affirms.

He watches her in awe and thinks how she has just changed his life again, and once more changed the course of history. And without any flair or drama – she accepted his proposal on her terms as if it is something she did routinely. He is impressed by her ability to separate her emotions from reason, particularly because he feels overwhelmed by his own. He struggled for years to come to terms with his identity, and since he arrived here he has done nothing but struggle with the complexity of his feelings for her, their past together, a child who will never be but would always bind them in some way, and his role in the greatest of tragedies. But Daenerys’ willingness to come to his aid again when she has every right not to threatens to wash away those complexities until there is nothing left but the polished stones of truth.

Truth is almost too simple, he thinks.
Chapter Notes

You will have to bear with me over the course of the next 2-3 chapters before we reunite the leads, but I'm pretty happy to have things moving in the right direction and we're getting somewhere soon.

Thanks again for all the comments and taking the time out of your day. Everybody have a great weekend.

9 years, 5 months after death

Jon spends most of the next several weeks acquainting himself with Orion and the other dragons which will accompany him. They are understandably weary of him at first but not hostile and he starts to differentiate between them and their personalities bit by bit. He even grows to enjoy their company as he is able to be his quiet self around them and nobody demands him to make polite conversation.

Daenerys soon leaves on Drogon, presumably to order the movement of her troops and arrange for the ships, though he is not sure as nobody offers him the details. He assumes that she needs some space to herself after the heaviness of the last two weeks and he does not begrudge her for taking it. It allows him to clear his own head and turn his mind to the massive task at hand.

She is not providing an enormous number of soldiers, but he believes the move to be strategic. First, as it is, the number of ships he will have in his fleet will easily outnumber any fleet in Westeros. And the second largest fleet would be Yara’s, who presumably will join the good fight. Second, the five dragons, of which are significantly larger than Drogon was the last time anyone in Westeros saw a dragon, may inspire enough fear to avoid bloodshed altogether. Third, had she sent him across the Sea with a million men, he recognizes that he would lead them into battle and shirk away from the sort of leadership she expected from him.

The day he is to set sail, he is busy organizing the men and directing the flow of arms and provisions onboard. When she arrives in the harbor, all the men stand at command instantly, but she dismisses them quickly and casually and motions to Jon to join her.

“We will depart within the hour,” he tells her.
“Good. Do you have everything you need?”

“Yes, Your Grace,” he is careful to be professional lest the men come to the wrong conclusion about him before the war has even started.

“I wish you well in the wars to come.” She says, purposely reminding him of the words he spoke to her a long time ago.

The corners of his mouth lift up ever so slightly and he nods at her before turning and walking the long walk down the pier.

“Jon?” She calls after him and he turns on his heels.


“Aye, you have my word.” He swears.

It is a long climb back up to the vantage point which will give her the best view of the departing fleet. There is a tightness in her chest which she blames on the dozens of stairs she’s scaled but it does not abate even after she has been standing and breathing calmly for nearly an hour. As his ship pulls out to sea she is suddenly overcome with the fear that she will never see him again, that this is a fool’s errand, and that she is sending him to certain death. It is irrational because she knows that she could conquer Westeros in less than a day and she has equipped him well. But the fear nags at her nevertheless.

When the ships become but tiny dots following the setting sun, she heads inside. Everything is as it was this morning, and her palace is buzzing with end-of-day work but she feels exceptionally lonely.

This is ridiculous, she admonishes herself. He is just one person.

But she has gotten used to his presence and the knowledge that he is there, even on the many days
on which she did not even see him. Now that he has gone, there is a gaping hole and she struggles to make sense of it.

Nearly four moons pass before she receives word that the journey across the Narrow Sea was a success. An already long journey was made longer because Jon wanted to sail directly to the North and solidify his alliances there.

When he arrives at White Harbor he is immediately greeted as a savior. He credits the dragons shrieking menacingly overhead in protest of the climate that does not suit them. But it takes less than an hour before Lord Wylis Manderly takes it upon himself to explain that a week ago, 6 months’ worth of food and provisions for the North arrived on ships from Braavos. At first House Manderly believed they were facing an invasion and certain death, but the captain of the first ship to come ashore explained that these were a gift from the Queen of the Realm, delivered in conjunction with the arrival of her new King.

“Smoked pigeon! Now that is a delicacy I am keeping to myself,” Wylis stated proudly.

“The apple does not fall far from the tree,” Jon laughs, paying homage to Wylis’ deceased father who had always been a loyal ally.

“We are at your service, in whatever way you could use us.” Lord Manderly says.

Horses and wagons distribute the food across the North, and for the first time in years there is hope.

He looks forward to, and dreads, his return to Winterfell in equal part. His memories are mixed; happy moments of childhood, the angst of being a Stark bastard as he grew older, the soul crushing battles against Ramsay and the army of the dead all compete for dominance within his head. He also feels partly a stranger as he enters through the main gate with a small group of men. He has left his army further out, not wishing to appear overly aggressive before he’s even had a chance to open his mouth.

Queen Sansa of the North, the woman who was a girl that he thought was a sister, greets him as he dismounts from his horse.
“Welcome back,” she says simply, a tight, formal smile crossing her lips, “join me inside, the winds today are dreadful.”

He nods and follows her through familiar corridors. Things look much as he remembers them, though the faces have changed. *Time waits for no man*, he thinks. Although he has never enjoyed southern climates, after the many weeks in Valyria, he finds the drab and dark walls and rooms of Winterfell strangely depressing.

“What should I call you? Do you still go by Jon?” She asks in a typically haughty tone once they arrive in the chamber that she has set up for him.

“Don’t be ridiculous.” He implores.

“You will have to pardon my confusion. You’ve come here flying the Targaryen banners.”

“I’ve chosen my alliance,” is all he says.

“What was that like?” Sansa wonders out loud, “To see her after all these years? She does not strike me as a particularly forgiving sort.”

“I’m still standing.”

“With an army and five massive dragons. You’re more than standing, brother,” she observes, then continues, “presumably you’ve come to ask me to have the North join you in the Dragon Queen’s newest adventure?”

He looks at her and knows that she does not expect what is coming and he is immediately sorry for her. All those words about love and duty being in opposition to one another come flooding back.

“No, Sansa. I’ve come to ask you to align yourself with me, and with the Queen.”

“I am the Queen,” she says icily and he dreads the confrontation about to come.
“Not when this is all over. The North will be unified with the other Kingdoms, as equals.”

“I wish you luck in telling the northern Houses that.”

“The Northern Houses? Hungry and broke, to the last one? Empty stomachs tend to lead to clear thinking.” He says, his voice rising.

“We are a hardy people, and we are used to suffering far worse than what is going on now. Better to die hungry and free than live under the reign of blood and fire.”

“I’ve been to Essos, I’ve seen it with my own eyes. We squabble and starve while they thrive. If that is life under Daenerys Targaryen, Gods, we should fight to the death for it.” He says, passionately.

“As you’ve come to do?” She guesses.

“I may not have been born to lead anyone and I never wanted to lead, but life demands things of us. You must know that, with all that has happened to you. All those things led to you being here today. And me as well. I can do this, Sansa. I can show our people what we could aspire to, together.”

“And if I justifiably don’t trust her and don’t wish to join your cause?”

“You will have to step down either way,” he says bluntly, “but if you do it now, you can do it with the benefit of having made the right choice at the outset.”

“You’re just trying to get rid of me. After a decade of me devoting my life to the North while you fucked off to the forest with a bunch of barbarians you now presume to tell me that in the blink of an eye you’ve decided it is time to replace me.”

“It is not my decision,” he admits, “but I understand it. You betrayed my trust when you told Tyrion Lannister what you had promised to keep to yourself. We’ve all had to pay a price for our choices during that time. She could have elected vengeance and instead offers you a choice – step down and live out your life in the North without perturbation. On that, you have my word.”
Sansa looks at him in disbelief.

“You’re still infatuated with her?!” She exclaims. “After all that she’s done? After all this time?”

“Sansa, you have always been a woman of many gifts. Arya once said to me that you’re the smartest person that she knows. Do not make me question my opinion of you.” He says sharply.

“I did not bend the knee to the Dragon Queen the first time, and I am even less inclined to do so now, when she finds it too bothersome to come and demand it herself. You may relay that message to her, in whatever way you please.”

“You are making the wrong choice.”

“One of us is.” She replies and walks away.

Three months later Daenerys receives a raven from him, the first direct communication they have had in more than half a year.

Your Grace,

I hope that this letter finds you well and reports of our progress so far please you.

I have returned from the Iron Islands, where I presented your offer to Yara Greyjoy who accepted without reservation. She wishes me to tell you that should you have any other offers to further the relationship between the two of you, she would be most open to consideration. I think this to have been said in jest; nevertheless she insisted that I transcribe it. Yara’s fleet consists of 38 ships, all of which sail under your banner now towards The Reach where they will await further instruction from me.

I moved the troops west to Moat Cailin and then north to Winterfell where they remain while I complete consolidating the fractured northern Houses. 157 men of the Free Folk, led by Tormund have joined me. He asks that the next ship you send across with provisions include a good woman or ten.
Sansa remains Queen in the North for the time being. She is hostile to the notion of abandoning her post, and I do not consider sorting this issue out a great priority at the moment. I ask that you do not see this as a provocation on my part; I intend to carry out our agreement at a more opportune time.

We will set south on the Kingsroad and then east to the Eyrie before turning our sights to the Riverlands.

Thank you for the provisions. I remain, as always, much obliged.

She reads his letter too many times than she would openly admit to anyone. It does not escape her than 10 years have passed since her death in King’s Landing, and for the vast majority of that time, she never expected to see Jon Snow again, much less be entangled in military operations with him.

Relying on her discipline, she waits a fortnight before she pens a response.

Lord Snow,

It is good to hear that you have found the conditions in Westeros favourable thus far.

Please pass on my gratitude to Yara. She is as I remember her. As is your sister Sansa. I suppose it is comforting to know that some things shall never change.

I wish to inform you that I shall dispatch Grey Worm with a group of builders to King’s Landing following the next full moon. I believe it necessary to establish a clean water supply for the people who live there. They shall begin with the construction of aqueducts and settling tanks for storage of water. Once you have full control of the Riverlands, they shall move north to construct concrete core bridges with arches to make them stronger and allow for longer bridge spans that will connect to new roads. This will make your transit to the south more efficient, as you will no longer be constrained by the congestion of the Kingsroad.

Grey Worm has the memory of an elephant; as such you may not find him to be pleasant company.

I will be travelling to the wedding ceremony and coronation of a chieftain of Baozou, in the Great Deserts of the South but I have advised Lord Marcellinus in Valyria to respond to your requests with
the utmost urgency in my absence.
10 years 3 months to 11 years 3 months

Chapter Notes

Thank you for bearing with me. I always intended to gloss over the chapters when they are not together but they still turned into full fledged ones. We are obviously nearing the end of that and towards the resolution. Thanks for the comments and the encouragement to keep going!

10 years, 3 months after death

Your Grace,

I apologize for the delay in writing to you. We have run into difficulties with the early winter which has made further advancement of the troops inadvisable. The horses of Essos are not accustomed to covering long distances in icy conditions and it would be foolish to be cut off from our provisions. Unfortunately, this will result in a delay of several more moons as we await the spring thaw.

I hesitate to ask for further provisions to be sent for the soldiers, but I think it wiser than siphoning supplies from the local people. We can settle on repayment when this is over.

I will have to take a small number of men and the dragons south to King’s Landing. As you have likely heard by now, groups of roving thieves from The Reach have started attacking your builders who are too far spread out to mount an effective defence. I will attend to this issue while Yara remains just north of the Neck with the army and the Free Folk who are in no hurry to breathe the “pig shit air” of the south.

He does not receive a reply in the coming weeks and fears that she will see the delay as too great a setback. But a few weeks after that, ships arrive from Braavos, restocking the provisions as he has asked.

He finds little opposition to his march south, despite being accompanied by 500 foreign soldiers. He believes the dragons are the main reason for it and he is grateful for their constant menacing presence. As he travels through the towns, he attempts to forge alliances while not lingering too long. The Lords are a mix of indifference and passive respect for the son of Ned Stark, who remains the prototype of a tragic hero in this land. Jon chooses to capitalize on those feelings, which causes him to go through inner turmoil reconciling Ned Stark’s role in his own life.
Your Grace,

We have moved south swiftly and the morale of the men traveling with me improved significantly as we left the snow behind.

The roving gangs were much worse than I had anticipated. Stealing gold and supplies from the builders was a bold provocation to be sure, but not unexpected. As they made their way through the countryside, they looted the villages and drunkenly raped an untold number of women and girls. I conveyed to Highgarden that we would no longer tolerate this but the attacks kept coming.

At first, I was measured in my response and willing to throw the men we captured in cells, but when I saw a girl of maybe 11 or 12 years old, bloodied and dead in her eyes, I could not stand for it. There is no room for such men in the present or the future of this land. In all the books written about wars between men, there is scant mention of the price paid by women. No more.

I burned them. They eventually stopped coming.

Yara and the rest of the men have come as far as Harrenhal and will proceed to King’s Landing. I will ride North tomorrow and take half of the army west to Casterly Rock which has been under siege to the Ironborn for weeks.

11 years after death

“The dwarf is here.” Yara announces as she walks into Jon’s tent.

“How many other dwarves are you familiar with?”
“Has he told you what he wants?”

“To speak with you. We can have him tossed from the camp if you’d like.” She smirks and he knows it’s because she has been doing a lot of sitting around and waiting and is itching to get into some sort of a skirmish, even a meaningless one such as this.

“Bring him in,” Jon sighs, wanting to get the inevitable meeting over with. He has to speak with Tyrion at some point in any event, and this saves him putting aside time in the future to do so.

“Your Grace,” Tyrion greets him as he walks in a minute later, “you have done well for yourself. Dragons, armies, a well-stocked caravan, what more could one ask for?”

“Why are you here?” Jon asks, dispensing with the pleasantries.

“A few days ago, the new Prince of Dorne, Turan Martell, requested an audience with me. I thought it prudent to proceed.”

“A presumptuous move on his part given your lack of affiliation with anyone of influence these days.”

“Sometimes ancient channels of communication are better than none at all.”

“And now you’ve come here to make a deal with me?”

“Not make a deal, but present you with a potential solution to the Dornish issue.”

“We don’t have a Dornish issue.” Yara says. “The Dornish are good at drinking wine and fucking. My father once told me that if you are going into battle, it is better to see a Lannister army in front of you than a Dornish one behind you.”

“Yet you sit here, at a standstill with them while you’ve had little trouble convincing or forcing all others into submission.”
“If it were up to me, we’d overrun them in a day,” Yara replies, “but I do not get to make that call.”

“When war can be avoided, it is always best avoided.” Jon says.

“Then you will want to hear what I have to say.” Tyrion states and sits down presumptuously, as if he expects to stay a while.

“Prince Turan has a daughter for whom a suitor is needed.” Tyrion says, raising his eyebrows and letting the comment sink in.

“We’re finished here.” Jon says flatly but his intention is perfectly clear.

“I have met her; she is pleasing to the eye. And at 17, a suitable age for marriage, with many childbearing years ahead.”

“She’s a child.”

“Nonsense,” Tyrion waves him off, “and you know it. The Prince invites you to join him to discuss this matter in person. He promises free passage and a cessation of hostilities. I would advise that you at least go and speak with him.”

“So he can murder us all?” Yara asks snidely.

“Would you murder the vassal of the Queen with 800 dragons? Especially if your strengths amount to drunkenness and fucking?” Tyrion asks no one in particular then turns to Jon, “You have always been a pragmatic fellow. This outcome is not even particularly onerous for you and would allow you to achieve all your goals here in an instant.”

“Yara, leave us.” Jon instructs.

Yara appears annoyed but leaves the two men alone after a moment.

“You are overstepping your bounds.” Jon’s voice betrays a warning.
“I am only presenting you with information, which you can choose to turn to your advantage.”

“You are not my advisor, and I did not seek your counsel. There is far too much history between you and I and Daenerys to have this simply be seen as a matter of passing on information. Do not insult my intelligence and pretend otherwise.”

“I presume that she would rather have my head on a platter than anywhere near you?”

Jon says nothing.

“Well, I probably deserve that.” Tyrion muses.

“You know that I cannot do this.” Jon tells him after an awkward minute passes.

“Why? What is holding you back? Thoughts of your Queen, I assume, and where is she? And when you are King here and this is all over, that’s the same place she’ll still be. And whether you want to admit it to yourself or not, deep down you know that she herself would at least entertain the thought.”

“Oh, would she?” Jon asks sarcastically.

“You think that a woman in her position got there without making strange bedfellows along the way?”

Jon wants to strangle Tyrion with his bare hands for the insinuation, and his face must betray his feelings because Tyrion goes on before Jon has had a chance to open his mouth.

“She is smart and she is deliberate. Alliances and peace are made in all sorts of ways. The Dornish Prince is now at a distinct disadvantage. Dorne has never been particularly close with the North and now they will be the last to come into a united kingdom. That does not leave the new King – you – inclined to treat them especially well. A union will provide a lifelong alliance, and will assure them that they will not be forgotten by the throne.”
“I am not a pawn in your or anyone else’s game. Not anymore. I will not marry a stranger out of some warped sense of duty. And even if I was inclined to consider it, I would say no, because then the message I am sending is that open rebellion not only acceptable, but in the end may be rewarded.”

“Jon Snow, the man who put his life on the line to save a few thousand Wildlings against all reason. Are you telling me now that you are willing to put a hypothetical and highly questionable daydream over the good of your people whom you will ask to march south to yet another bloody war from which many won’t return? Thousands of them? Meet with this Prince, it costs you nothing.”

Your Grace,

We are in the last throes of uniting the kingdoms. Although it has taken far longer than I had assumed at the outset, I tell myself that building a lasting peace is always worth the time and effort.

As you are aware, Dorne remains a challenge. I travelled to meet with the new Prince, Turan Martell, whose chief concern is that Dorne has fewer historical ties to the other Kingdoms and therefore less incentive to enter into long term alliances. He has made a proposal that I marry his oldest daughter, Nayla in a demonstration of good faith and to seal the relationship between the North and the far South.

To be clear, I have no personal interest in accepting his offer. My word remains my bond. However, I thought it prudent to seek your counsel regarding possible alternatives, should you have any.

I look forward to returning your dragons.

She reads his letter no fewer than a dozen times before she crumples the parchment and throws it in the fire.

She promptly summons Drogon, climbs his impressive scales and flies for hours, deep into the Shadowlands, over trails lined with ferns and trees and over bare slickrock until she sees the canyon ahead, lined with monumental formations on either side. She has come here many times when she needed solitude and be in the company of just herself and the dragons. She would let herself be young again, strip down to the most basic of clothing and scramble up the rocks and through the twists and chutes of the many smaller canyons around. Today she feels too tired to bother, so she sits in the chalky red dust and revels in the silence.
He doesn’t wish to marry the girl, she reasons. There was nothing in that letter that suggested otherwise. But the benefits of the move are all too obvious to her. He is of her blood, and marriage, especially to a young woman, would all but guarantee a succession, a continuation of their lineage. Somebody will have to rule after Daenerys dies, it is a fact that she is keenly aware of, and yet she has nobody in mind. Why not his children? Even if they are with another woman, a thought that hesitates to admit repulses her to her core. And in truth, military alliances are but one way of making progress. She, herself, has had a number of meaningless, to her anyway, dalliances with the men of Essos and even Sothoryos. She was a practical woman, and if they were stupid enough to think with their groin instead of their brain, so be it. A political marriage in this instance would be favourable to both sides and would prevent further bloodshed. If she were entirely detached from the situation, she may even push for it.

I could just order him not to do it, she thinks. She is his Queen after all, and this possibility has left her feeling particularly salty. But she has sworn to let him carve his own path across the Narrow Sea, and besides, an order to not proceed would only make her look like she cares entirely too much what he does with his personal life. Which, she of course does, but appearances matter if you are Queen.

She shouts his name into the deep, wide canyon before her and the echo throws it back.

When she returns to Valyria, she sends a raven with a response immediately.

Jon,

Likewise, I hope to hear that you’ve come to the end soon.

I have considered the offer from the Dornish Prince. It is not unreasonable; alliances have been made in such ways since the beginning of time. As it concerns matters of the heart, I am afraid I cannot provide you with counsel. We must all know our strengths, and this is not one of mine as it may be obvious to you having observed the choices I have made.

While I have certain misgivings, should you find it necessary to proceed, I would not hold it against you. You have always held the view that war is the last and least good option and you may find this alternative to your liking on that account. I only hope that whatever decision you come to is one that you feel is right for now and the years to come.

Time passes and in the blink of an eye we grow old.
I look forward to your return.

11 years, 3 months after death

The feast is elaborate, spanning most of the afternoon and late into the evening hours. Prince Martell has invited far too many people, his hopes of announcing a plan to marry his daughter to the most powerful man in Westeros obvious to all in attendance. There are dancers and singers and performers of magic paraded in front of the long wooden tables and the food and drink are abundant. As the hour gets late, Jon start to suspect that he is one of a handful of people who has not had enough wine to render him unable to so much as stand up straight.

He feels slightly awkward seated to Nayla Martell, although the young woman is not obtrusive and does not force a conversation.

She is beautiful, dark long hair in tight curls bouncing to her mid-back and absolutely striking greenish-brown eyes that stand in stark contrast to her olive toned skin. She is comfortable in her surroundings, but not overly confident and he senses that the pomp and circumstance of the evening are not her preferred way of spending time.

“I like books,” she says shyly. “I have taught myself to speak the High Valyrian tongue and am nearly fluent in Asshai’I as well. All from books.”

“That’s remarkable,” Jon says, “my sister, Arya has been to many places and has told me of the difficulty of fully grasping the different tongues.”

“There is a certain logic to each tongue that becomes apparent the more you become accustomed to it. Do you speak any other tongues?”

“I have spent many years with the Free Folk who speak the Old Tongue of the First Men among themselves. They often laughed at my bastardized attempts to speak it.” He laughs.

“I would very much like the opportunity to go to Essos and have a chance to practice with the people there.”
“I am sure you will someday.” He says.

“Can I show you something?” She asks as she reaches for a large bunch of round, purple grapes and starts to pull them off the stems and then arranges them in a pyramidal pattern on the table between them.

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“Do you see? If you add pairs of numbers in one row, you will see your answer in the row below.”

“Aye, it’s a very curious trick.”

“I don’t know what it means, but you can keep going infinitely. Or until you run out of grapes.”

He finds the young woman charming and she reminds him of Arya, the thoughtful, balancing counterpart to his sister who was always a doer. But neither fit into the roles which have been ascribed to them at birth.

“Lord Snow?”

“Yes?”

“I would make a good wife and would work hard to please you, but it would make me very happy if you would allow me to continue to study the books.”

He turns his chair to more fully face her, and hunches over until his forearms are resting on his knees.
“Princess Nayla, you are a special woman. I hope that when your wedding day comes, you will hold hands with a man who understands that fully and who will make it his life’s work to support your talents.”

“Thank you,” she says gratefully.

“But please understand, that man cannot and will not be me.”

“Have I done or said something to offend you?” She asks, panic rising in her voice.

“No, nothing. Nothing. You have been a wonderful hostess and I am much obliged to your father for organizing this great feast. There will come a day when you will make a man very happy and I do hope that you find the right one. But I cannot commit to a marriage that I do not believe in, even if it is the simplest way to unify our kingdoms. I will relay this to your father.”

“When you speak with him, please don’t tell him I spoke of my books? He does not think of it as an appropriate pursuit.”

“You have my word.” Jon promises and stands up to leave.

“Do you already have a woman?” She asks before he’s bid her goodbye.

“I have someone for whom I have waited a long time.” He says carefully.

“And does she wait for you?”

“Aye, I think that she does.” He says with a small, hopeful smile.
Because I will be traveling, I decided to post this chapter before leaving, so it's faster than usual. It is a bit uncharacteristically light, but I was in the mood for the sort of thing and I generally don't see relationships developing linearly - there are ups and downs. We will return to a more serious tone next chapter and work from there, but I desperately wanted to infuse a bit of humor and a sense of wonder. Somebody has also asked how many chapters are left and in truth, I am not sure, but guessing in the 6-8/9 range?

Thank you for all the amazing comments, they do make my day.

11 years, 6 months after death

Your Grace,

I could not have imagined when I sailed across the Narrow Sea that this journey would take more than two years. In some ways it feels like an entire lifetime.

With matters under control here, I feel confident enough to once again cross those waters and return your dragons as I vowed to do.

I have kept detailed diaries of the battles and the alliances I have made, as well as of the losses among the men, and where the losses were incurred. I thought that you would want to know and be able to give some detail to their families. I shall deliver all these to you.

I remain in King’s Landing and find it to be as strange as I always did. I am not sure that I will ever truly belong, and I question why it is seen as a given that the seat of the throne must be here. It is one of the many things I wish to discuss with you in person.

I intend to set out in about a fortnight.
11 years, 10 months after death

The day before Jon is set to make his return is exceptionally busy for Daenerys and she is grateful not to have time to allow her mind to wander. She is hearing petitions with the magistrate until the afternoon, and in the evening joining the wedding feast of the magistrate’s son, which is being celebrated at her palace, at her insistence.

Nevertheless, the day manages to drag on, and every procedural matter is more complicated than need be, and every petitioner has twice as much to say as is the usual course of action. She does not break for a midday meal, instead pressing forward with a mixture of annoyance and boredom.

She has grown accustomed to holding petitionary court, and the routine of it mostly suits her. Every person in the room has a role to play – the two scribes making quick work of the rolls of parchment before them, the translators sitting next to them, the three justices sitting as a royal secretariat to her right, the judicial assistants seated directly behind them, the magistrate of the rolls who announces the petitioner and the guards manning the door. She has gotten to know each of them over the years and feels comfortable in their presence.

Just as the last of the petitioners of the day is about to be introduced, one of the members of her personal guard whispers in the ear of the magistrate, who then approaches her quickly.

“Your Grace, I have been told that the King of Westeros has arrived on account of the favourable winds and is requesting an audience. Shall we adjourn?”

She sits up straight and feels each beat of her heart as it quickens.

“I was prepared to receive him tomorrow,” she says trying not to gape at the doors behind the magistrate.

“I will see to it that he is advised to return in the morning.” The magistrate confirms.

“No, it’s alright, bring him in. You will have the last petitioner return at another time. Please pass on the court’s apologies.”

“Yes, Your Grace.”
She steadies her fidgeting hands by grasping to the rich wood manchettes of her chair, digging her fingernails into the glossy polish. She has thought of this meeting a million times over the last months and years but in this moment, she’s forgotten what she planned to say and how she planned to react.

He walks in, steady and confident and without a trace of the uncertainty he wore on his face the first time he stood before her at Dragonstone.

The magistrate introduces Jon and rattles off his full title, not a word of which she catches.

“Your Grace,” he says in greeting, politely but his features are soft. She notes the bow of the head which feels oddly formal.

His eyes land on the crown on her head, a simple and utilitarian knotted silver halo with a stylized dragon sigil in the centre, but otherwise inconspicuous. A dark blue cloak covers her arms and shoulders.

As she is about to stand and bridge the gap between them, she sees a pretty young woman coming to stand just slightly behind Jon. Her face betrays her youth – plump, rosy cheeks, bright eyes and bouncy hair battling to be set loose against the girl’s shoulders. Daenerys feels herself stiffen, shoulder blades pulling back tightly.

“This is Princess Nayla Martell of Dorne,” Jon says and the girl curtsies perfunctorily.

“It is my honour to meet you, and present to you a gift from my father,” the girl says in accented Valyrian as she passes a small box to one of the attendants.

Daenerys is bewildered by the scene, and wonders if this might be the only time in her life that she has been rendered utterly speechless. She is so taken aback that even the temper that she’s had to hold down since she was a child is too stunned to overtake her. The words, the tone of his letters nag at her, as is the thought that it is far too late to safe herself from falling and yet here she is feeling like someone has cut her legs off under her.

“Welcome to Valyria,” she says curtly when the silence that has fallen over them strikes her as insufferably awkward.
“Thank you,” Jon says and takes a step forward but sees Daenerys recoil in a flinch, even though she remains seated at least 50 feet from him.

“You must be tired from your journey,” she says, her voice polite but cold, “you will be shown to your chambers.”

Jon is confused by how aloof she is and whips his head wildly around the room, but just sees people in her service, faces unreadable, as if this is another day in the ordinary course of business. His eyes linger on the young woman behind him.

“I apologize for our early arrival, the winds picked up considerably the day before yesterday.”

Daenerys just nods at him, hoping that he will have the good sense to leave this room and grant her the last bit of dignity.

“I have assured the Prince of Dorne that his daughter would experience the ways of Valyria as she considers local suitors,” Jon says slowly, testing the waters.

It is as if the room is suddenly filled with fresh air and Daenerys can breathe again. She feels foolish for her wrong assumption, foolish about her over-the-top emotional response, and elated that she was so utterly wrong.

“Of course,” she says, tone immediately softening as she stands and walks to join them. She addresses Nayla first, politely shaking her hand and offering a bright smile. She then moves left to stand directly in front of Jon, and offers him her hand as well.

As she extends it, he sees that her hand and arm are covered with intricate patterns of rich reddish brown knots, tribbles and ripples.

“Valyrian custom,” she says, “for a wedding feast we are celebrating tonight.”

He takes her small hand in his and shakes it tightly, holding on for a moment longer than necessary, but it elicits a smile from her and he concludes that he made the right move.
Two of her attendants walk through the door, speaking to her quickly and she turns to address them, then translates for Jon’s benefit.

“I am quite late to get ready, so you will have to excuse me, and we shall meet back here in the morning.”

He nods, keeping his face straight as to not betray his disappointment that they have to part so soon. She notices it as she moves past him and turns back. “Walk with me,” she says over her shoulder and Jon and Nayla hurry to keep up with her and the flurry of maids and attendants following her.

They round corners and scale stairs until they find themselves in her dressing chamber where two young girls are stripping the rings off Daenerys’ fingers and starting to undo the braids in her hair while an older woman undoes the pin holding her cloak in place and folds it neatly.

“You will join us tonight?” She asks Jon hopefully.

“I don’t want to intrude, Your Grace. We can meet tomorrow as planned.”

“Princess Nayla, would you like to come to see a Valyrian wedding ceremony tonight?” Daenerys asks, turning to the young girl standing in the doorway as the attendants painstakingly work on the dozens of tiny buttons running from the nape of her neck all the way to the small of her back.

“It would be an honour,” she responds eagerly.

“Then it is settled. I will see you shortly,” Daenerys says.

The attendants stop when they have unbuttoned the dress and shoot pointed looks at the visitors.

“Right, we should be going,” Jon says awkwardly, backing out of the room. He feels as though the world is spinning and everything is happening too fast for him to properly process. He concentrates on taking one step before another and trains his mind to go blank.

“The Queen is very beautiful,” Nayla notes.
“Aye,” is all Jon says.

“She is not married?”

“No.”

“She must be waiting for someone,” Nayla says with a slight smile and watches the blush rise up Jon’s neck.

“I’ll not speak of it to anyone,” she promises, “thank you for bringing me here.”

When they are gone, Daenerys holds her arms up absentmindedly and allows her attendants to strip her down. She takes one of the wet washcloths and freshens up, not having enough time for a full bath while they pull her hair and patiently set about braiding rows of braids that they twist and lift up into a bun when done. She slips into the dress laid out for her as they fuss with the ties and adjusting the length.

She feels like her emotions have been uncharacteristically out of control today, dropping from the highest highs to the lowest lows with little time to spare and she feels exhausted as she reaches for the wine that she’s been brought with a small meal. She does not touch the food, but drinks greedily to settle her nerves and enjoys the warm feeling spreading as the wine travels down her throat.

_He looks older._ But a good sort of older, she thinks.

The celebration is the most elaborate and colorful affair that Jon has ever attended. It is performed outdoors, with lattice canopies forming arches above, and vines of flowers spilling over the sides in bright whites and pinks. The bride and groom are adorned in silver cloth that is beaded and studded with gems, reflecting the sun’s light into hundreds of angles that strike the guests like shimmering fireflies.
Daenerys sits midway down, attempting to be inconspicuous but he sees how most people nevertheless turn to gape at royalty in their presence. She is dressed in a lilac gown that shimmers with silver threads that are woven through in irregular patterns. On her head she wears a much more elaborate knotted tiara, dotted with blue and clear jewels, matching those in her dangly earrings and link bracelet. It is the first time he has seen her dressed this way and he turns his head before he starts to look like just another subject in awe.

The wedding ceremony itself is curious and Jon is captivated by the massive fire in the center, and the bride and groom who take turns walking around it, and then stepping towards one another only to step back, several times. The bride has intricate jewelry, in her hair, her studded ears and pierced nose, yet she appears entirely unencumbered by it.

A man who appears to be a sort of a high priest speaks in Valyrian and Nayla loosely translates that the ceremony is now over, the bride and groom having been bound to one another in this life and the next. They follow the others as they move indoors to an extraordinarily long dining room with tables arranged in parallel leading to the central table where the couple sat with honored guests, including the Queen.

The feast is abundant, and they are greeted and entertained by dancers and singers long into the night. Nayla is pleasant company, though she is more interested in asking the servant girls to identify the strange fruits and sweets set out on the table and voraciously memorizing new words.

Jon watches Daenerys throughout the evening, at first surreptitiously – while she is eating, or talking to the people next to her, or the ones who have come up to greet her. But then she looks up, scanning the room and catches him in the act and he’s too transfixed to look away. When she smiles at him apologetically he does away with subtlety and turns to look at her as he pleases.

“It would be lonely, don’t you think?” Nayla asks.

“What would?”

“To be the Queen and be the only one to not have company with you.”

Jon chuckles, “and I thought that you were shy and living with your head in the books.”

“You can always learn more from observing real life. Go on,” she encourages him, “I myself am heading in for the night. It has been a long journey and I’d like to see the city tomorrow.”
Jon watches her leave with an attendant who has been assigned to her, then takes a long drink of wine from his goblet before he stands up and walks the 53 paces to the empty chair to the Queen’s right.

“May I?” He asks and she motions for him to sit down.

“I’m so sorry about all this, you must think that it’s an absurd homecoming, if you could even call it that,” she says with a shy smile.

“It’s a bit awkward,” he agrees, “but then I didn’t really know what to expect.”

“Me neither,” she admits.

“When you imagine something happening a hundred different times, it will always happen the one way that you haven’t managed to picture in your mind.”

“Speaking of imagining things, when I saw the Dornish girl with you…”

“I apologize for that, I truly did not think of how it would look.”

“Don’t do that again. I have become more forgiving in my old age, but do not test me,” she says, her voice sharper than it has been thus far and he feels guilty for how he went about introducing the two even though it was unintentional.

“I sincerely hope never to have the opportunity.”

“Good,” she smiles again and takes a sip of her wine. “Tell me how did you resolve the Dornish issue?”

“I convinced her father that the true broker of fortune was the Queen herself. That you had several good Valyrian suitors for his beloved daughter, who was all too happy to make the journey. And that by forging such a relationship with a trusted Valyrian prince, he would in effect be currying favour
“I see – I am to play matchmaker?” She asks, amused.

“Please find her a worthy husband, she is a special girl whose mind would go to waste with a man that can’t accept a woman who is smarter than him. I also promised him gold. For the eventual wedding ceremony and for the purpose of rebuilding Dorne after a decade of hostilities that left much of it burned to the ground.”

“How much gold, exactly?”

He raises his hand as if he is holding an imaginary wine goblet and indicates to her to take a drink.

“That much?” She asks in astonishment.

“You may want to keep going,” he says with a laugh.

“Tell me in the morning so that I can be properly angry with you for being so presumptuous.”

“I wagered a guess,” he says, “that the alternative would have been less desirable to you.”

“What did I just say about you being presumptuous?” She grins, feeling warm and languid from too much wine and having a man, this man sitting too close to her.

“Do you want me to marry the girl?” He asks, taking the goblet from her hand, refilling it and drinking from it himself. He swallows slowly and deliberately, enjoying watching her squirm.

“I’ll feed you to my dragons,” She threatens in her most serious voice.

“Speaking of dragons, do you know what Grey Worm said to me when we met in the Riverlands?”
She shakes her head, and he goes on doing his best imitation.

“Good, Orion here. You be stupid again, he not so good like Drogon. He eat you and I let him.”

She laughs heartily, “I would have liked to see that.”

“Aye, I’m sure that you would. I have many more stories…two years is a long time.”

“Nearly three,” she reminds him, “and tomorrow, we will sit all day with the military council and you will give us the details and it will all be documented and done properly. But tonight, we drink to a new beginning,” she says, tipping her goblet in the direction of the newlyweds.

He sits back in his chair and takes a closer look at her, letting his eyes travel down her body, then takes her goblet and has another drink.

“Get your own, we’ve not a shortage here,” she says, snatching it back.

“I’d rather share yours, decreases my odds of being poisoned significantly.” He says dryly.

“We’re a few steps beyond me wanting to do away with you, wouldn’t you say?”

“Ah, so you did want to get rid of me at first?”

“And many times thereafter,” she smirks.

“What changed your mind?”

“You,” she says simply.

They watch each other for a moment, neither wishing to break the spell by speaking. But the celebration rages loudly around them and a tray falling with plates shattering breaks them from their
reverie.

“It is getting late and we will have far too many regrets in the morning about all this wine,” she finally says.

“I am not that drunk,” he protests.

“I had a head start in my chambers while contemplating the evening.”

“Any interesting conclusions?” He wonders, continuing to drink her wine.

“A few.”

“Would any of them happen to involve me?”

“A few,” she says again and smiles knowing that she has him disarmed.

“I better end my evening here before there are tales of a Queen who is easily swayed by jugs of wine. Soon I’ll have every peasant in the known world trying to take advantage of my generosity.”

She stands up and he is impressed by the fact that she does not sway. He fully expected it, and almost wishes that she’d fall over and conveniently land into his arms, then realizes how silly that sounds.

Although it felt to him like they were the only people in the room while they spoke to one another, the moment she rises from her seat, everyone in the room jumps to their feet as well. She waves them off with her hand casually and they return to the festivities. But it is a clear reminder that they are not simply two people enjoying a social gathering together.

“Do you want company?” He takes a chance and asks her, his eyes darkening as they search hers for answers.

“Why, do you know of anyone suitable?” She asks pointedly.
He tells himself to breathe, just keep breathing.

“I do want company,” she answers, her voice betraying no doubt, “but wanting company and needing company are still different things. And I am at least a jug away from blurring that distinction.”

“So keep going,” he encourages her jokingly.

“I am glad that you have had a safe return, Jon Snow.”

“Good night, Dany,” he replies softly, his body screaming to touch her, but he understands that he is a guest here and that she is the Queen of all the people gathered in this room, him included.

He watches her as she walks down a long corridor, her silk dress swaying behind her, hugging the curves of her hips. On a logical level, Jon knows why this would be the wrong move, at the wrong time, but it takes him all the will power he has to turn around and walk the other way in search of his own accommodations.
11 years, 10 months and 1 day after death

Chapter Notes

Early morning flights can be productive, after all. I will be largely offline for a couple of days but I hope to finish the next chapter before the weekend. This chapter was fairly tedious to write, so I hope that it manages to accomplish something in the long term. Thank you for all the comments - truthfully I had not initially intended the story to continue past their reunion, but I could maybe be convinced to go a couple of chapters beyond. Happy Wednesday!

11 years, 10 months and 1 day after death

The morning light is harsh and the throbbing in her head unbearable as she squints her eyes open. The oldest of her attendants, Vera, chatters away as she readies her clothing and Daenerys wonders if the woman’s voice has always been this high pitched and how it is that she’s never noticed before. *Dogs will start howling if she goes on,* she thinks to herself as she swings her legs off the bed.

“You need strong mocca today,” Vera observes and orders one of the other girls to bring it.

Because she is a poor sleeper – sleep either does not come for a long time or is interrupted many times before she is rescued by the rising sun – she shies away from the drink, but today she is willing to try whatever may work.

Vera rubs a cool herbal paste under her eyes and brings her the drink. It is hot, but they’ve learned that even boiling liquids do not bother her. She makes a face at the bitter flavor but chokes it down nevertheless.

“It must have been an outstanding celebration,” she says, amused at her Queen’s sluggishness.

“Will you please remind me of this morning the next time I reach for a goblet of wine?”

“Of course, Your Grace.”
“Are they all waiting for me?”

“The council is still in the dining room, still breaking their fast. The cooks have brought out the sweet breads and jams to occupy them for a little while longer so you have some time.”

“Good.” She hopes the sweetness of the meal will render them all useless by mid afternoon and allow her to return to bed, close her eyes and sleep for another day.

“The King of Westeros was up particularly early, carrying rolls of parchment to the court room. I had Marcellinus explain to him that we have attendants for such matters, but he paid us no attention.”

“He can be exceptionally stubborn, as you will learn.” Daenerys says in passing while slipping on her rings.

“Is Your Grace comfortable with his presence? He behaves as if he is very familiar, but we have all heard the stories…” She trails off.

“Idle gossip, even when it is true, does not always need to be repeated,” Daenerys says with an edge.

“I apologize, Your Grace.”

“It is fine Vera, my headache is making me disagreeable this morning.”

She dresses in silence, which leaves her to muse over the events of last night. *Gods, did I nearly bring him to my bed?* She asks herself, imagining a very different morning than the one she was having. It had been so easy, all of it – the conversation, the closeness of his body such that she could feel the heat radiating off it, the musky smell. For a moment she forgot their history and what he’d done to her and it was terribly freeing. She almost impulsively decides throw all caution to the wind, send the military council home and order Jon to her room until the oppressive tension that has been building within her has found its inevitable release.

But she is the Queen of the realm and remainder of the world and there is work to be done.
The magistrate announces her arrival and the room rises. Jon watches her expectantly as she walks past the other side of the table and up the three steps to her seat. She greets everyone in Valyrian, and he makes a note to speak with her later about getting him a tutor who could at least teach him the basics of the language. Although he is a Targaryen like her, until now he’s never felt any inclination to learn the tongue of his ancestors or their customs.

She finally spares him a brief look and a nod, but he feels the distance in her body language and he can sense that she is embarrassed about last night.

“Welcome, King of the West,” her military commander says in a halting Common Tongue. “Antonios,” he points to the young man seated to Jon’s left, “will be translator for you, most of the peoples here do not speak the Common Tongue.”

“Thank you,” Jon says, cursing himself once more for his lack of initiative.

“Shall we begin?” Daenerys asks, then continues in Valyrian.

“Lord Manius is requesting a reconciliation of coin,” Antonios whispers to Jon, who points to an unrolled scroll. “He says that does not account for the 175,000 gold coins which you have requested be delivered to Dorne forthwith.”

Jon looks at Daenerys to see if she will intervene before he speaks and says something she would prefer stays private. He watches her participate in a lively debate with the elderly Lord as Antonios translates in his ear.

“The Queen says that it represents a token of goodwill which she has approved without seeking the input of the council as she considered it prudent to act without delay when you conveyed the request. Lord Manius says that this will create discord among the remaining kingdoms which have not had similar grants extended to them and that will put the Queen at a disadvantage in potential future negotiations.”

If he didn’t feel so out of place, Jon would find it funny that she is justifying what amounts to buying his availability as if it is a commodity to be bartered.
She turns to speak to him after a protracted discussion.

“The goldsmiths of Sothoryos will forge the coins for you out of bullion reserves. Half of it will come from my personal reserves, and the remainder from the Iron Bank, which Westeros shall have to repay over a 10-year period by shipping, at your own cost, a tenth of your grain, to Braavos at the end of each harvest. Do we have an agreement?” She asks in a tone that lets him know he should simply agree and they could work on the details later.

“Yes, Your Grace,” Jon says without hesitation, eager to get out of this room.

“Very well. We shall break for the midday meal and reconvene when the sundial is at the second hour.” She stands up, which signals dismissal to the others, who neatly pile out into the corridor and down to the dining room.

Jon is unfamiliar with the procedural matters, and more importantly, wishes to have at least a moment of one-on-one contact with her, so he is slow to rise and lingers awkwardly until she has caught up with him.

“You should prepare for the discussion to turn to Sansa,” she tells him flatly as she walks past him. He follows her hasty pace.

“I was expecting you to address the matter,” he says.

“And?”

“I am ready to speak to it.”

“I want to know what you intend to say,” she says simply, maintaining a professional tone.

“That her title of Queen is in name only. That the Knights of the Vale were allied with her when I arrived, and I needed not to alienate them, so I thought it best to not push the issue with her further. And now she is of no consequence to the kingdoms.”

“It is not an acceptable outcome,” Daenerys says carefully, “and I will have to consider a range of
possibilities to rectify what I view to be an untenable situation.”

He nods faintly, having expected this, and not wishing to get into a debate with her when their time is so limited.

“How are you feeling?” He asks, hoping to change the subject, “After last night?”

“Like death warmed over,” she says, rubbing her right temple absentmindedly, “though I hear that you were like a busy bee this morning.”

“I didn’t know what to do with myself,” he admits.

“You’re a King now, do try to play the role, for the benefit of those who would serve you if nothing else.”

“I will try to keep that in mind.”

As they approach the dining room, he turns to enter but she grabs his arm.

“King now, remember? Follow me.”

He does as he is told and she leads him to a smaller dining room with two place settings, each attended to by a young serving girl.

“I don’t mind eating with everyone else.”

“They mind eating with you,” she says breezily, “this affords them an opportunity to talk about us freely. If we sat with them they would be constrained by protocol and politeness.”

“What do you suppose they are saying?”
She takes a moment to think about her answer.

“That I favour you and grant you concessions I do not make easily for the benefit of others.”

“I don’t mean to cause you inconvenience.”

“That is a 12-year-old concern, wouldn’t you say?”

He doesn’t know what to do but offer a slight smile.

“You always eat alone?”

“I am not alone,” she points out, “and I do join them on occasion, but I try to have it be seldom.”

“Reigning over people is tedious,” he remarks with a sigh.

On the third day of the council meetings, Jon is growing tired of sitting in the same room, but nobody else appears bothered, and they continue to go about their business.

“Lord Manius is asking, what of the dragons? The Queen says that if the King in the West wishes to take Orion back, he may do so. A dragon is not a slave and he is bonded to the King now. It is also not advisable for dragons to be solitary, so the King shall have to take back another one or two to provide company for Orion. Lord Manius is reminding her of what happened the last time dragons inhabited Westeros. He is also concerned about Orion laying eggs in the future. The Queen is reminding him that they have already begun to control the dragon population here by restricting the number of hatchlings and the same methods could be employed in Westeros.”

Jon understands that all this is necessary, but painstakingly going through the details of the battles and plans for the future has left him restless and irritable. First, because talking has never been his strong suit. Second, because he finds governing itself to be tedious and sitting around a table with people who have a penchant for him bores him. And finally, because the days have been filled with these discussions, he has had no time alone with the woman who interests him much more than the value and distribution of grain stores and he fears that she will once again turn aloof and distant.
He is lost in his own thoughts until he hears his sister’s name spoken.

“Lords Manius and Felix wish to know why Sansa Stark has not been formally removed.” Daenerys tells him, annoyed when she realizes that he hasn’t been paying attention to his translator.

“She calls herself Queen, but the Lords of the northern Houses have sworn fealty to me.”

“Lord Felix says that Your Grace rules over Lords, Ladies and chieftains and you in Westeros. There are no other rogue Queens and there shall not be one in the North.” Antonios translates.

“She is not rogue and will not oppose our rule.”

“By failing to recognize the reign of our Queen, she is at best disrespectful and at worst in open rebellion, Lord Felix says.”

“She has no army and no followers willing to take up arms in her name. With all due respect to the learned Lords, I grew up with Sansa Stark and know her better than anyone in this room. She can be headstrong and contrary and unwilling to admit to her faults, but she will not plot against the realm.”

“She has not stepped down because she is taking advantage of your familiarity, Lord Manius says. And that if she requires removal by someone more objective, then so it should be done.”

“There is no need to resort to violence on this matter,” Jon says firmly.

“Your diplomatic means have not borne fruit, Lord Manius says.”

“I did not think it important to our Queen how inconsequential people may or may not refer to themselves in a land on the other side of the world.”

“That is the Queen’s decision to make, he says.” Antonios continues to translate.
“It is my decision, and I have made it,” Daenerys interjects when she grows weary of the back and forth, “Lord Felix is right to say that the treatment of Sansa Stark thus far is inconsistent with our rule. Lord Manius is likewise right that removal is necessary. And the King in the West is right that Sansa Stark does not pose a threat that rises to the level of a violent response. So I shall travel to Westeros and deal with her directly,” she says, to the surprise of all.

“I think that perhaps it is time. Not just because of Sansa, although dealing with her is certainly a powerful motivating factor. Do you think it unwise?”

“No…” he trails off, “I would have counseled you to do the same, had you sought my advice. I am, however, surprised given the nature of your feelings towards Westeros that you would even consider such a move.”

“I’ve been to every land over which my rule extends. There is value in meeting with the local Lords and coming to understand their culture better. And it is where I was born, though I have no memory of it.”

“You don’t have to convince me;” he says gently.

“Have you ever sat in a room with an open door, and there is a slight draft, not bothersome enough that you want to walk to the door and shut it, but enough that you feel cold and your mind drifts to it constantly. And eventually you become so irritated that you get up and shut it, which you realize you should have done long ago? That is how I feel about Westeros. It bothers me, deeply, what I did there, but also what I failed to accomplish.”

“Being a bastard and not knowing my mother felt like that, for all those years.”

“Then you know that there is no peace until you have confronted the matter.”

“I do.” He confirms.

“What do the people there think of me? Now?” She asks, and her voice is small, uncharacteristic for a woman who has not had to turn her mind to what people think of her for many years.
“Most people don’t spend much time thinking of their Kings and Queens. They are too busy surviving and filling their children’s plates. Some still remember what happened at King’s Landing, that is true, but Westeros is much larger than the one city. Then there are others who I believe see you as a benevolent, but absent force. For their sake, it would be good to be visible now and then.”

“Do they see you as a Targaryen?” She wonders.

“I suspect in name only.”

“The ghost of Ned Stark will always be with you.” She notes thoughtfully.

“If that is his legacy, then so be it.”

She looks up at him in contemplation and he is very tempted to brush back the errant strand of hair that’s curling along the side of her face.

“And do you think of yourself as a Targaryen?”

There it is, he thinks, the big and ugly thing that’s been hanging between them since the moment Bran revealed the truth. The reason that he withdrew. The reason her claim on the throne was instantly questionable. The reason her own advisors worked to replace her with him. The reason she lost faith in him. All of these things held together like a ball of yarn that unravels and comes undone with the gentlest touch.

“I don’t give myself much thought at all,” he says honestly, “but I do not reject who I am, and there are good reasons why I should be open to learning more.”

“Like Valyrian?”

“Yes. And some of our customs and age-old history,” he says, absentmindedly tapping his fingers against the table. He looks up to meet her pleading eyes and knows that dancing around the issue won’t do, not if there is any sort, even the barest of chances, that they could find solace and partnership in one another again.
“But that is not what you are concerned about. What do you really want to know?” He asks her, standing up.

She likewise stands up and walks towards the windows, to have access to fresh air and also to escape his gaze.

“How you feel about the thing that has always hung in the air between us – that we are family.”

“Truthfully, these days I don’t really think about it at all. Maybe it is the passage of time that has dulled the shock, maybe it’s that when you get older you have less time to spend on overthinking every matter, maybe it’s that I want something badly enough to no longer view this as an obstacle. I wish I could give you a clearer answer, but that is the best way I know how to explain it.”

“And what of tomorrow?” She asks so quietly that he has to strain to hear her.

“Dany, can you look at me?” He waits a moment before speaking more firmly, “Please look at me.”

She wills herself to turn around and face him and is relieved that while he has come to stand closer, he isn’t dangerously invading her personal space. Lifting her eyes up to meet his feels like an enormous effort but she does it.

“When Tyrion came to see me beyond the Wall and told me that you were alive, it was like waking from a dream to a different world. And when I sought you out and found out that you were carrying our child when I plunged a dagger into your heart, it was like returning to the same, only worse nightmare. Just shadows and darkness and a dark sky unfurled. And there have been a million regrets swirling in my mind, and all the complicated feelings of guilt that come with those. I don’t know if I should ask for forgiveness because I don’t know if forgiveness can even be given, much less whether it should be given by you or the child that never was. But I promise you that at no point in the last nearly three years did a moment of doubt about the propriety of our relations, past or present, enter my mind.”

“But…”

“Not once.” He says firmly. “Do you not believe me?”

“You live in a place where it is not the norm.”
“My own life is my business.”

“The King’s life is everyone’s business.” She counters.

“Growing up, I didn’t want for much. And the few things I did want, I mostly did not ask for because being nearly invisible was what was expected of a bastard. The one thing I wanted, my father, or Ned Stark I suppose, would not give me. Now I’m a grown man, and again, I find myself wanting but one thing. And maybe there are a million legitimate reasons why I should not fight to have it, but none of those matter to me anymore. I hope that you understand that, and that it’s enough.”

She watches him, her eyes glistening with unshed tears and it hurts him to see it.

“Whatever gap there is between my words and your doubt, I cannot bridge it for you Dany. I wish that I could, but you are the only one who can decide whether it is worthwhile doing.”

She swipes furiously at her eyes with the back of her hands.

“Is it even safe for me in Westeros?” She asks.

“Yes. And I will be with you. If I have to stand guard outside your chamber all night while you sleep so as to make you comfortable, then so be it.”

“Hardly a task fit for a King.”

“You know that I don’t care about such things.”

She nods. He steps forward and cups her face in his hands, wiping away the tears with his thumbs. It is an intimate gesture, but he doing it for her benefit and so he moves back out of her personal space before he has become intrusive.

“They are expecting us back any moment now.”
“I will be there in a minute.” She says, and he leaves her to compose herself.

She curses her emotional state and reminds herself that being steady, deliberate, and unfeeling has been the hallmark of her reign. There are still times when she feels it most unfair that everyone else is free to feel as strongly as they wish, and express those feelings, but if she gives in to them, she worries that it will resurrect the Mad Queen narrative. She cannot afford to go down that path again and allowing herself to forge a bond with Jon again has left her vulnerable and exposed in ways she did not anticipate.

She walks slowly and deliberately back to join the court and purposely avoids Jon’s eyes. When she sits down, she addresses him in a perfunctory and clear voice.

“You shall call the northern Lords to receive their Queen in Winterfell. If Sansa Stark wishes to suffer the shame of being deposed before them, then I shall oblige her. We will set sail in a fortnight. You may join our fleet, or leave before, in the ship that brought you here if you wish.”

“I will join you, Your Grace” He states, as if there is only one, obvious answer.

“Very well. Tomorrow, we will reconvene to discuss strategy. I need to understand the structure of the northern Houses and who are our best allies.”

She turns to her council and Antonios translates for Jon’s benefit.

“Two of you shall accompany us on the journey to Westeros. I shall leave it among you to determine who is best suited, with a view to being gone for at least four or five moons. You will inform me of your decision tomorrow, so that preparations can begin for the duration of my absence.”
12 years after death

Chapter Notes

I managed to meet my goal of posting an update before the weekend, as promised. And it’s a bit longer than my usual chapters, but it was fun to write something a bit different in terms of pacing. Thank you as always for the comments, I enjoy each and every one of them. Everyone have a great summer weekend!

12 years after death

He doesn’t see her for two days after they board the ship.

His accommodations are by far the largest and most grand ones onboard which shocks him, but then he generally feels like he is in a permanent state of surprise whenever he is around her. Wherever her own chamber may be, it is not in the direct vicinity of his, no doubt a conscious decision on her part.

Her advisors have grown to respect him somewhat, at least on a personal level, so he has company during his meals and his stay has not been unpleasant. Just strange. The two military councilmen continue to be weary although the language barrier almost helps him, as they feel free to carry on their own conversations without concern about his presence.

The third night is oppressively hot and he feels as if he is being boiled alive in the sweltering heat of his chambers so he seeks relief out on the open deck. As soon as emerges from the ship’s hull, he sees her standing outside, forearms resting on the wooden railings of the starboard side. He pauses for just a moment, the last moment he has before he has been seen, to decide whether to join her, or retreat. As he takes the next steps forward, he thinks that he could always blame his decisions on the damn heat.

“I have not seen you since we boarded,” he prods.

“It always takes me a day or two to get my bearings at sea,” she admits, “which has a direct benefit for you. Is your cabin to your liking?”

“I’m assuming it is meant to be yours?” he asks.
“Yes, fit for a Queen. I learned a long time ago that being mid-ship is far better for one’s stomach and bowels. Considerably less swaying. Which makes you the lucky winner of the finest bed in the known world,” she chuckles.

He dare not make a joke, though one does spring to mind nearly instantly.

“Less swaying but no less of this unbearable heat?” He guesses.

“Soon we’ll be joined by everyone else, scurrying out like mice in a flood. Until then, I intend to enjoy the view,” she nods towards the heavens.

“I didn’t know you had an interest in the constellations.” I didn’t know so many things, he wants to add.

“Western stars. In the western skies,” she says.

“Are they different than out East?”

She smiles at him like he has just asked her something so plainly obvious and yet she is charmed by it, at least in part.

“They must be,” she notes, “since that is what I remember thinking the first time I boarded the ship with Tyrion and Varys. The skies at night that guided our way changed. The North Star gets higher and higher up as we go further north.”

“If you look up when you’re beyond the Wall, it’s right above your head,” Jon says in assent.

“And in Sothoryos, you can’t see it at all,” she tells him.

“Because the world is round,” he says, remembering their conversation from a few years ago.
“Because the world is round,” she affirms.

They stand side by side for a long time, enjoying a very slight breeze and the whooshing sound of the sea. Every now and again he steals a glance her way, studying here face, very softly illuminated by the string of lanterns hanging between the ship’s masts. He thinks that she doesn’t notice, deep in thought about what is to come, battling her own internal demons that come along for a journey such as this one.

She does notice, and almost wants to tell him that in fact, she notices everything about the way he looks at her, but recognizes that she’d then be at a tactical disadvantage. Besides, his gaze makes her feel warm and languid inside and she sees no reason to give that up.

“The hour is getting late, I should head down,” she says when the silence starts to become awkward.

“Tell me something instead,” he jumps in unexpectedly, before he’s had a chance to bite his tongue.

“What?”

“Anything,” he says with an easy smile before he goes on, “we’re both awake, it’s hotter than hell down below and we’ve nothing better to do.”

She raises her eyebrows at that last bit, more for the benefit of herself than him. She finds it funny, that he says this now, and wonders what if they’d talked the last time they were on the ship instead of discovering each other’s’ bodies. Would they even be here today?

“There is a place deep in the jungles of Sothoryos, called Noudougou. It is very simple, and can be ruthlessly violent in its disputes with its neighbors. But there is a custom they follow, when people marry. They send the couple away, a trip that takes a day downriver to where the sand meets the sea. The sand is so white and so fine that it has been mistaken for grain flour by the sea merchants. And the couple spends a moon there, doing what people do when they marry,” she says with a slight smile.

He beckons her to go on.

“While they are gone, the entire village works to build them a home, furnish it, and provide enough food for 3 moons. So that their only real obligation in the early days of marriage is to each other. We may think of them as base savages, but in some ways, they are able to see what matters in a way that
He finds herself staring at her, not for the first time this evening and she fights the blush rising up her cheeks.

“I’m sorry, I’m more of a doer than a talker, but you asked for a story.” She says by way of apology.

“No, that was…beautiful.” He replies.

“Even in this wicked world,” she says wistfully before turning away from him.

“Good night Jon.”

“Good night Your Grace,” he replies and she turns on her heels to let him see her clear and unambiguous eye roll at his use of her title.

He smiles in return.

The next evening, she returns to the same place, a small part of her hoping that he would join her and eventually he obliges.

She doesn’t turn to see who it is because she knows it is him by the sound of his boots creaking against the ship’s floor boards.

When he comes to stand next to her, he is not so close that their shoulders are touching, but he is close enough so that she can smell him and she draws comfort from that.

This becomes a nightly ritual.
“Ghost died 7 years ago,” he tells her.

“I’m sorry,” she says, “and I am sorry that I had not asked. I know how important he was to you. What happened?”

“Old age caught up to him. It was a peaceful death. One afternoon, he just did not wake up.”

“I am glad that he did not suffer.”

“He lived a good life in those last years. Running around the snow and rolling in it happily like he was a pup again.”

“You must have been devastated,” she guesses.

“Aye. I couldn’t believe it at first. Then I started bargaining with the Gods, if there is a Lord of the Direwolves, I prayed to him too. For just one more day, one more hour with him. He’d haunt my dreams and there were days when I would wake up and my arm would reach to my side, blindly feeling for the top of his head. But he was gone.”

“I know how that is,” she says softly.

“It’s still lonely without him sometimes.”

“He was a good boy.”

“He was the best boy,” Jon agrees.

As they get closer to their destination, the temperatures begin to drop gradually. Daenerys covers herself with a cloak, but Jon is a sturdier breed having spent so many years in the snow, and it irritates her a bit that he does not feel the night’s chill the way she does. Yet another reason she holds
Westeros in contempt; much of it is uninhabitable by her standards of comfort.

She seems contemplative but relaxed tonight, so he dares venture where he has never gone before.

“Did you give her a name?”

It is not necessary to specify of whom he speaks. He continues to stand at a respectable distance, even all these nights later so he cannot feel her body tense ever so slightly but he sees it in the way she draws her shoulders back just a tiny bit.

“No…”

“Even now you don’t have one when you think of her?”

“No,” she says, “after Rhaego, I thought I would never have another child, so I gave it no thought. And now I think that the dead should not be burdened with a name; they are already burdened with too much sorrow that we make them carry like an anchor because we cannot let go.”

He swallows a hard lump in his throat which also provides him with the convenient excuse of not uttering a word.

“I do think about what she would have looked like sometimes,” she admits eventually.

“Me too,” he says and steals a glance at her only to find that she is looking at him as well.

“I’ve had the thought on occasion,” she says carefully, “that you would not have wanted her, because of our relations.”

“Dany, no…”

“I don’t think it anymore.”
“I have heard it said that when you have children, it is like having your heart live outside your body,” he tells her quietly, “and in that way, part of mine will always be missing.”

She just draws a long breath. *The dead are the lucky ones*, she thinks. They do not live their days crushed by false hopes.

“I am most looking forward to a hearty meal,” he says after one too many nights of eating fish for dinner.

Daenerys crinkles her nose in distaste.

“I am not choosy about my food, but your particular brand of cuisine leaves a lot to be desired. Such heaviness, every meal left me feeling like I had a stomach full of rocks.”

“Oh, you just haven’t given it a proper chance,” he insists.

“What is your favourite?” She asks, curious.

“Potatoes. Fried in lard.” He says wistfully.

“Gods, it’s a miracle you have the body that you do.”

“Ah, so you’ve noticed?” He teases and it earns him a now-famous roll of the eyes.

“I walked right into that one, didn’t I?” She laughs, and it comes to her surprisingly easily.

“Aye,” he says and she can swear that his eyes are twinkling.

“Like a whore into a brothel, as Tyrion would say. Funny, I have not seen the man in a dozen years but every so often I am reminded of him, for one reason or another,” she admits.
“He played a large role in your life at one time.”

“Yes, at one time,” she emphasizes.

“Do you think that I should have married Ser Jorah?” She asks him, out of the blue one night. He just about chokes out an answer.

“What? No…”

“Sometimes I think that I should have,” she insists.

“Why?”

“He loved me,” she says simply.

“Many men have loved you,” he ventures a guess. *Present company included.*

“But he really loved me. Tyrion once said that love is the death of duty but it wasn’t for him. He had a duty to me because he loved me. He would have moved heaven and earth for me. He died for me...I miss him.” She says wistfully.

“He was very devoted to you,” Jon says, “it was plain to see.”

“He was the only one who was there from the beginning, who had seen me at my lowest and highest points. And he loved me nevertheless. How is that not enough?”

“Should marriage not be made of more?”

“I’m older than you!” He protests.

“Just barely.” She grins.

“With age comes wisdom,” he tries to jokingly provoke her.

“And a balding head,” she says, enjoying the look of horror in his eyes despite the fact that his hair is as thick as it ever was.

“I felt strangely jealous of him,” Jon admits.

“Why?”

“The way you greeted him when he arrived at Dragonstone, the warmth in your eyes.”

“I loved him too,” she says simply, “in my own way.”

“If that is all there is to marriage, we would all marry our best mates instead of taking a chance.” He says after a moment.

“Maybe that comes with marriage. As you grow old, have children together, celebrate happy events and mourn tragic ones together, maybe you fall in love as well. Why should there be shame in choosing something that is safe? People have married for far worse reasons.”

“There shouldn’t,” he says carefully, “but if it’s choice you’ve got, then you should try to have it all.”

“Sounds so easy,” she says, her eyebrows arching high as if to signal that she is not convinced.

“We’re the ones who make it complicated,” he replies.
On a rare night that he is out under the stars before her and allows himself to appreciate her figure as she walks up the stairs and toward him. Her hair is very loosely tied back in a bun that is barely held together. She has not worn her hair down, ever, since they were reunited in Valyria, but it was always tightly and neatly braided, sometimes in intricate patterns.

“I took my bath earlier tonight than I usually do,” she explains when she notices him staring, “trying to get the chill out of my bones. This cold will be the death of me.”

“It’s shorter. Your hair.”

He noticed it the first time he laid his eyes on her in that courtyard three years ago but has never had a reason to comment on it. She takes a pin out of the bun and shakes her head until her hair spills with a bounce, making her look much younger than her years. It is still a bit wet and has a slight waviness to it. It reaches just below her shoulders, more than a foot shorter than he’d been used to.

“I couldn’t stand it anymore in the heat, it was always sticking to my neck,” she explains.

Maybe it’s the starlight, or maybe it’s the two glasses of wine he had with his supper or maybe it’s just that he’s so utterly charmed by her that makes him reach over foolishly and run his fingers through a strand that frames her face.

“It looks good.” He says, unable to think of anything better.

He hears one of her guards promptly take a step forward from his place in the shadows.

“My first and last warning?” Jon guesses, chuckling.

She gives him a good-natured punch in the chest.

“Huh… still alive,” she jokes then ties her hair back up.
Gods help him, he’s fallen for this woman for the second time in his life.

She notices his mood darkening as they get closer to land but doesn’t press him why. She understands that people’s feelings about their homes are complicated.

“Do you believe in the afterlife?” She asks instead, suspecting that his brooding may predispose him to having a philosophical discussion.

He raises his eyebrows at her.

“I thought of little else these past nine years,” he finally admits.

“And?”

“My first thought was, maybe I am living it? How do we know that any of this is real?”

“It certainly feels painful enough to be real. And I have lost feeling in my toes in this godforsaken weather, which I think is another indication.”

“Aye,” he nods, “and then I thought there must be something? We were both brought back, isn’t that all the proof we need that there is more to life than this?”

“Maybe…”

“You sound skeptical.” He observes and it earns him a slightly sarcastic smile.

“There is something out there that I do not comprehend – like whoever raised us from the dead. I just think that perhaps it doesn’t really matter. It makes people lazy and sluggish, to think that they just have to survive this life to get to the next. We should live life with a desperate desire for it, not just wait for some better place.”
“Or you could do both.”

“Is that what’s driven you in your battles the last 3 years?”

He smiles genuinely at her, for the first time in several days.

“I’ve had other…thoughts to inspire and guide me.”

“Well, whatever it was, I am glad it worked.”

“Me too.”

“I’ve always wondered about one thing,” he tells her one night.

“Just one? I thought you more ambitious than that.”

“I’ll sit down and think of a hundred others then,” he deadpans.

“So, ask, whatever it is.”

“How does it feel, to be unburnt?”

She gives her head a small shake, “Of all the things you could ask…”

“It’s fascinating!” He protests.

“How can you fetch me a torch?” She asks and he grabs one, then watches as she lights it by holding it to one of the lit up lanterns.
“Help me get my cloak off?”

His hands go to the pin at her neck and he tries to steady them so that he’s not obviously fumbling around. He undoes the pin and lays the cloak over the ship’s railing. She hands him the torch and he watches her, transfixed, as she holds the palm of her hand in the flame.

He cringes, “it hurts just to watch.”

“It just feels warm,” she says.

“I can’t even eat porridge that is too hot,” he notes.

“That’s how I first realized that I was different,” she thinks back, “as a child I could put very hot food, even boiling brew in my mouth and my tongue would not burn.”

Jon moves to snuff out the torch but she grabs his forearm.

“Hold it to my face if you want.”

“No!”

“It won’t hurt me.”

“It hurts me just to think about it,” he responds and throws the torch overboard, then reaches for her cloak.

“That was a perfectly good torch,” she says.

“Add it to the list of things I have to repay you for,” he says as he goes about affixing the cloak around her. His fingertips brush her bare shoulders and he allows them to trail down to her collarbone unnecessarily. She feels more affected by it than the searing flame of fire.
“What did you think of me when we first met?” She asks him playfully.

“What did you think of me when we first met?” He says in jest.

“I’m curious.”

“I thought that you were formal, short tempered and a bit on the haughty side.”

“Oh, is that all?” She laughs.

“Ser Davos felt that I had a few other thoughts, best not expressed in polite company.”

“Did you?”

“Maybe…” he says, and goes on, “and you? Did you think me a brute?”


“At least I left an impression.”

“I was conflicted. On the one hand, I could tell that somebody had properly raised you, that you were meant to be a Lord regardless of the bastard bit. But on the other hand, you were also undeniably rude to me.”

“Ah, come on, you would not have respected me if I had bent the knee at Dragonstone.”

“You don’t know that.”
“Oh yes I do.”

She cocks her head to the side and looks at him thoughtfully.

“Tyrion said that you were in love with me. After you left to capture the wight.”

“Tyrion Lannister, the man of many theories.”

“So then you weren’t?” She guesses.

“Maybe in lust. At that time.”

“That’s fair.”

“Dany?”

“Hmm?”

“What are we doing here?” He asks, genuinely hoping for whatever guidance she is willing to give.

“Standing on the ship and speaking.” She deadpans.

“I didn’t mean-“

“I know what you meant,” she says, “and I don’t know. Living our lives?”

“To what end?” He wonders.
She studies his face carefully, the way his brows are creased, the way his hair spills over his cheeks and the small puffs of warm air being pushed out of his mouth as he breathes. She has done a good job of never standing too close to him while facing him, as it always makes her feel small somehow. He is not tall but his presence dwarfs her, at least on the inside. It is easier, as always, to turn away and train her eyes on the star-studded skies.

“When all this is over, things will happen or they will not. Who is to know which way the wind will blow?”

He senses that the conversation has come to an end and is not in the mood to push it further so he lets it go.

“How much longer do we have?”

“Just before the sun sets tomorrow, if the winds are favourable,” he says gruffly and she looks at him questioningly, wondering if she’s done something to offend him. He notices her confusion and sighs heavily.

“I don’t want to get off this ship,” he finally admits.

“You want us to turn around and go back to Essos? I could be convinced,” she says all too eagerly.

“No… I know that there are things to be done that require our presence. And that it is important for you to do this.”

“I can understand why I have little interest in seeing that wretched place again,” she says melodramatically, “but I would have thought that you would be happy. It’s a homecoming. The people love you.”

“Aye, it is home, you are right.”

“But?”
“But I can’t help but think that the moment we disembark, this,” he motions wildly between them, “will just disappear. And I am not ready for it. I don’t want it to.”

Usually they stand side by side, looking across the wide expanse of the sea, but now they are facing one another and it drives home how intense he is capable of being.

“Jon…”

“The thing is,” he says carefully, “this has been the high point of my day since the first night we spoke.”

“I would be lying if I said I didn’t feel the same way.” She admits softly. His soulful dark eyes gaze at her so deeply that she feels like he is almost looking right through her. She senses movement out of the corner of her eyes and notices that he is clenching and unclenching his right fist. She remembers his tendency to do this when he is nervous.

“When I am not with you, I think of you. And somewhere along the way I stopped denying to myself what was obvious, that I-“

“Don’t,” she implores, “don’t say it.”

“Don’t say what?” He challenges her.

“That you…whatever you were going to say,” she is flustered, “don’t, not now.”

He is left to stare at her in frustrated confusion.

“Returning to Westeros is what nightmares are made of, from my perspective. I am filled with little more than dread when I think of this place. I take pride in being strong – I would not find myself in the position that I am in if I weren’t strong. And yet this place makes me want to run away like a scared little girl. Which only makes me hate it even more.”
His stance towards her softens, both because he senses her desperation and because she is really allowing herself to be vulnerable in front of him. He doesn’t think especially highly of himself generally but he can’t imagine that there is another person to whom she would confess her fears in such detail.

“So please, I am asking you, if you care for me at all, don’t make this any more difficult than it needs to be. Getting up, putting one foot in front of the other, and lasting until the end of the day is all I can do when I get off this ship.”

He thinks back to the one other time she begged him for something and his blatant disregard of her feelings or the long game in that instant. And what it cost them ultimately.

“Okay,” he relents, “alright.”

“Thank you,” she says and feels like she can finally exhale again.

“But Dany?”

“Yes?”

“I am willing to do as you ask because there is a time and a place for things. But I want you to understand that I’m not done here,” he tells her firmly and convincingly.

She steps forward and places the palm of her hand on his chest.

“In spite of all that has happened between us, I am glad that you are here with me,” she says and drops her hand, “we should both get some rest. It’s a long journey ahead” she says, neither affirming nor denying his words.

When she sees the disappointment wash across his face as he looks away, she reaches up and turns his head to face her.

“If I intended this to be done, I would never have boarded this ship. Just…wait for me?”
He swallows hard and nods at her.

She has to will herself to walk away and descend down the stairs and out of his sight. The easiest thing in the world would be to turn on her heels, march her way back up and with a simple look invite him back into her world completely. But she remembers, so keenly, what happened the last time she mixed her affairs with pleasure and how poorly that turned out for them and nearly everybody even peripherally involved.

They dock in the late afternoon, as he had predicted. The men and her attendants busily disembark and proceed to unload the many wooden chests that have been stacked in high, neat piles.

Jon watches her as she watches the commotion, not wanting to disembark before her as a matter of appearances, so he stays in the back and leaves her to battle her inner demons until she is ready.

When they are the last two left onboard, he walks to stand by her side and in a moment of brazen confidence links his fingers with hers, for just the briefest of moments. When she gives him a quick squeeze back, he is emboldened and leans over to press his lips against the hairline at her temple.

“I’ll be right behind you,” he promises.
A couple of notes before you read:

1. I was originally not going to write this chapter but I changed my mind because I think that the issue at hand is one that I'm not satisfied has been properly addressed. Also, for all the many sins the writers committed in S8 (and they are truly numerous), the one that I will never forgive them for is to make the matter of Dany's fertility and succession a critical problem in S7 which had serious implications that had to be addressed. Then, the installed an infertile king and not only that but asserted that HIS infertility is actually a positive. Now that is some next level patriarchy and misogyny right there.

2. Bear with me, we will shortly move to resolution and the smut we all deserve.

3. I am an American living in Canada for years now, which makes me lucky enough to be celebrating two great nations I call home. Practically speaking this means slower updates as it is a holiday tomorrow and then we are flying back to NYC on the 4th for the long weekend. Nevertheless I am hopeful to have 1-2 chapters up over the next week.

12 years, 2 months after death

Although the circumstances of her return are very different than those of her arrival a dozen years ago, she can’t help but feel that she is reliving the moment. The weather is not as harsh, there is but a dusting of snow on the ground. They travel with far fewer people which makes them less of a spectacle and there is no sense of urgency or foreboding for the local people they pass on the road. Because Jon had kept dragons with him the last 3 years, even those no longer inspire the same sense of wonder. She is grateful for the banalities of life which have allowed her to travel with little interruption or inconvenience.

Jon is ever-present but respectful of her personal space and polite and formal when they are in public or in the presence of local Lords. He is careful to not sit too close, or guide her by placing a hand on the small of her back, to which he on occasion gives in when they are alone and away from prying eyes.

They arrive in Winterfell the morning of the parley with the northern Lords, by no small coincidence. Dany did not wish to arrive early and be forced to exchange pleasantries, and here mood would turn
foul anytime Jon suggested that it might be nice to have a day or two of rest.

As they settle into their seats at the center of the head table, side-by-side, with Sansa off to Jon’s left, Dany watches him exchange polite small talk with the woman he thought was his sister, including a quick hug. She meets Sansa’s eyes, but otherwise makes no acknowledgment, and consciously keeps her face unreadable and her general demeanor aloof. *I am not here to make friends*, she reminds herself.

The Lords all rise when she does and as she looks around she does not recognize many faces – the consequence of the passage of time and endless wars. The lack of familiarity actually makes her more comfortable.

After the perfunctory greetings, Jon speaks.

“I have spoken with each of you and consulted at length during the previous 3 years, as you stood by me and joined in marching south despite your many reservations. We have all agreed and sworn that the North shall be a part of the seven kingdoms, as equal, no lesser in any way, without a sovereign rule. I now sit in the throne, but northern blood courses through my veins and I will always have northern interests at heart when it comes to every decision I make, no matter how small.”

“The decisions you have made are evidence of a man who is motivated by things other than the good of his people.” Sansa interrupts.

“What decisions? You should have the courage to at least name them.” Jon says, sharply.

“The Dornish matter, for one.”

“The Dornish matter, if by which you are referring to having negotiated a peaceful end to 7 years of hostilities and Dorne rejoining the united seven kingdoms, would be a prime example of one of the better decisions I’ve made.”

“That is an interesting view. Our kingdoms and houses could have been joined by marriage. Instead, we are now indebted to the Braavosi, who were on the brink of invading us, and forced to send grain that rightfully belongs to our people across the Sea. Because our King wishes to keep up pretenses for the benefit of his foreign Queen.”
Daenerys has not engaged in the discussion and remains silent while Jon feels like his blood is boiling. *I have her temper, gods help me.*

“We are not here to discuss historical matters. The Prince of Dorne is satisfied at the outcome of our arrangement and his daughter has travelled to Essos and stands to be married there when an agreeable suitor presents himself.”

“And what of the rest of us? Our King spurned an offer of marriage with which would come children and a resolution of the succession issue which we have had since Bran the Broken assumed the throne.”

“Aye, Queen Sansa does point to a legitimate concern,” one of the Lords yells out.

“My Lords,” Sansa addresses them, “we have been told that having an independent North is untenable. But what is actually untenable is having no heirs to the throne. Which means that the foreign Queen will install her foreign children, who shall view us with the same distrust and contempt that she does, as Kings to rule us as they see fit. *Is this* the servitude we are expected to agree to?”

Jon is horrified by what Sansa has just said and cannot imagine a worse and more hurtful argument to voice out loud before Dany. He turns to her and the look on her face tells him all he needs to know. The damage that Sansa has incurred unwittingly will be almost impossible to undo. He can read Dany’s face well enough to know that she is channeling her agony into unbridled rage, and whatever agreement could have been made to leave all parties walking away with some sense of dignity is now dead in the water.

He desperately wants to interject and change the topic but he doesn’t want to breach Dany’s privacy or draw attention to matters of fertility, nor does he wish to overstep his bounds.

Daenerys rises, her eyes flashing across the crowd.

“My Lords, you will have to excuse my confusion, having arrived through the gates of Winterfell under the impression that Westeros – *all* of Westeros – was now ruled by its rightful King. Have I mischaracterized the state of affairs on the ground?” She asks icily.

“He is our king, in the north and the south and the east and the west,” a plump Lord seated midway down the room exclaims to rousing assent around him.
“Then, while I can appreciate the passion and dramatic flair of Lady Sansa, it appears to me that none of what has been said here today is in any way relevant.”

Jon looks sideways at her, but she continues.

“However, so as to remove all doubt, I wish to make it perfectly clear: as it pertains to who you wish to lead you into battle, build your cities and usher in a more hopeful future, I leave the choice to you – your King, or the woman who calls herself Queen in the North. I see you standing as free men before me, and as free men you shall choose in this very moment – independence and open rebellion against the remaining kingdoms, against your King, and against me and every army under my command, or unity and peace.”

The Lords look at each other, some panicked, some confused, others whispering in the ears of their neighbors. One finally rises in the front.

“Your Grace, we had already pledged ourselves to King Jon, and we have no intention to go back on our word.”

“Sansa, you have heard the will of the Lords.” Jon says, pleading with her to step down without further incident.

Daenerys interjects, “You will surrender your crown, disband your advisory council at once, cease communicating with the external world under the guise of royalty and pledge fealty to your King and recognize my ultimate rule. In doing so, you may keep your title of Lady and you may remain at Winterfell, undisturbed as long as you wish. Understand that this is the extent of my mercy; should you be tempted to question my rule and my decisions at some future time, the punishment will be swift and permanent.”

“So that’s it?” Sansa asks Jon bitterly.

“That’s it.” His tone is firm.

“And if I do not?” Sansa turns to Daenerys.
“You will be tried for treason and sedition and executed in accordance with the laws of the realm without undue delay. You will have the choice to be hanged or be burned.”

Jon’s ears are ringing so he can’t be sure whether he heard gasps from the Lords behind him or if he is simply imagining it. He was aware of this possibility but he pushed it to the back of his mind, certain that matters would not devolve to such a degree where these words had to be spoken. Don’t be stupid, he screams silently at Sansa inside his head. Don’t do this.

Sansa looks at both of them one more time, removes the crown on her head, and lets it drop to the ground with a clang of the metal then leaves the room slowly and deliberately to complete silence. Once she is gone, Daenerys follows with her attendants, moving far more swiftly, anxious to leave this place once and for all.

“Dany!” He calls after her as she rushes across the courtyard, heading for the gates where the dragons wait.

“Don’t,” she says with a warning when he has caught up with her.

“Where are you going?”

“I will fly south on Drogon and meet you in King’s Landing.”

“It will take us weeks to get there by land.”

“Then that is when I will see you.”

“Don’t do this – don’t shut me out because my sister is insufferable.”

She turns to him, her temper finally getting the best of her.

“If you had done as I had specifically instructed you to do before you embarked on your adventure of saving Westeros from itself, we would not be in this predicament. I was more than generous in
providing assistance when I owed you nothing and I was also very clear about what I expected in return. And yet here we are, dealing with the same insolent woman that has caused me no end of grief from the first moment I met her.” She hisses at him.

Jon grabs her arms and turns her body to face him. “I should have. I have always wanted to see the good in people and avoid conflict if possible. In this case it is a fault.”

“Step out of my way,” she says coldly.

“No,” he says, gambling that it’s the right move.

“Remember to whom you are speaking,” she warns.

They are at a standstill, staring at each other, both out of breath and clenching their teeth in frustration.

“I recognize that you are upset and that the words Sansa spoke were terribly hurtful. She knows nothing of our situation, but hurt that is caused by accident doesn’t sting any less. I understand that.”

She wrestles her arms free and continues into her tent outside the gates. He follows to find a flurry of activity inside from Vera and the other attendants who still in the midst of unpacking her things, blissfully unaware of the personal tempest going on. Jon catches Vera’s eyes and nods his head towards the flap door of the tent, urging her to leave. The older woman catches on quickly and ushers the others outside.

“It’s over now,” Jon says softly, “you never have to see Sansa again or think about her if you don’t want to. She has nothing to do with the rest of your life unless you let her continue to have power over you. You rule over the entire world and all she will have is bitterness for the rest of her days.”

Dany runs her fingers across the rough, scratchy wood of crates stacked on top of one another, then turns to look Jon in the eye, taking him by surprise.

“I feel like it will never be over,” she admits, “not the Sansa part, but the question of children and succession.”
“I’m sorry. I did not envision that being brought up.”

He doesn’t know what to say and he curses himself for it because he senses that she needs more than that but he is afraid to say the wrong thing so he just looks at her, trying to convey empathy.

“You’re sorry…” she muses but offers nothing further. “I will spend the night here, because I’ve spent most of my adult life stepping back from an emotional situation by detaching myself and never making a decision in the heat of the moment. Time doesn’t clarify things, but it dulls the senses. So I will do that, but in the morning, I will leave on my own as I’ve told you.”

“Let me come with you,” he begs.

“No.”

“Why?”

“Because you are a reminder, a living, breathing reminder of what I cannot have and I’ve been able to sweep that aside the more I allowed myself to get lost in you, but now I am finding it impossible.”

“You’re running away from me.” He says flatly.

“I am reclaiming the space I need to breathe,” she insists.

“How is it that I am stifling you? I have extended you every formal courtesy befit a Queen though it brings me no joy. I have held back from providing counsel or even my opinion about how to handle Sansa because I knew you didn’t want to hear it and I was willing to have you do things your way. I have kept my hands to myself, and myself out of your tent so as to not give people something to talk about because that is what you asked me to do. So with all due respect, what space is it that you now feel the need to reclaim?”

He reminds her so much of the young, temperamental, self-assured Jon Snow who walked into her throne room at Dragonstone and openly defied her while making an indelible impression. It’s the same tone of voice, the same naked frustration, the same combative posture.
“Do you know what it is like? To be a woman, and not be able to do what seemingly every other woman can with ease?”

He knows that he has to tread carefully here, and he softens slightly at her words, because he knows her grief to be so genuine.

“Do you really want to have this conversation now?” He asks her. “I have never been much of a talker, but I will listen, I will be there for you.”

She doesn’t answer which he takes as tacit approval for him to continue.

“You don’t know that you cannot have children,” he says, nearly wincing when he thinks how she may react.

“There have been a number of other men, through the years,” she says softly, looking up at him.

“I’m not here to cast judgment on your virtue. I don’t want to think about it, but that is as much as I will say on the subject.”

“I never tried to have a child or tried not to have one, I just let things come as they did. It never happened. Maybe it was bad timing, maybe there was other damage to me internally from the stab wound, maybe the witch’s curse returned, I don’t know.”

That does make him wince, but he knows she is not trying to hurt him.

“The Targaryens have intermarried for years,” he observes, “maybe something’s happened so they can only have children in this way.”

“Your mother wasn’t one of us,” she reminds him, “but I have considered that. I’m not stupid, I’ve had to.”

“So it could be possible.”
She does not argue.

“It makes me feel empty inside. And what Sansa said was dreadful, but it’s nothing that other people won’t start saying more and more the older I get. And not only do I not have children, which is painful in itself, but I’ve been so close to having them only for it to end in the most violent of ways, not once, but twice. That is what I have to live with. And it is unbearable.”

“You may be able to have children, or you may not,” he says carefully, “but whichever it is, know that it is the same for me.”

“It’s not,” she protests.

“Yes, yes it is. Because my future is tied up with yours so tightly that there is no room for divergence on this matter. None at all.”

“It doesn’t have to be that way.”

“Whether it has to or not, it is,” he says, running his hand through his hair, feeling emotionally spent. He collapses onto a stool, rests his forearm on his knees and pushes himself to continue.

“Do you know what my biggest regret was after we defeated the army of the dead? That Lord Varys came to me concerned with how you were coping and I told him in no uncertain terms that you should not be alone. And what did I do? I left you alone. To drown in your misery, to feel separate from the rest of us, to feel like you had no choice but the worst choice. All the things that came after, I feel like I can trace back to that moment, when I walked away from you.”

“I am not going mad,” she says, sounding utterly exhausted by the exchange.

“I don’t think that you are nor did I say that. But what you are asking me is to go against my better judgment and let this fester in your mind, hundreds of miles away where I cannot help you even if I wanted to. You have lived almost your entire life on your own, and I don’t doubt that it is contrary to your very nature to rely on another to hold you up, even if it is me.”

She rubs the bridge of her nose as to drive out the headache that is overtaking her.
“Grey Worm is in King’s Landing, providing security to the aqueducts being built. Yara is also in King’s Landing. I will stay in their company, I will meet with Tyrion, and I will wait for the rest of you to arrive in due course if that is what it takes to convince you to let me go.”

Jon contemplates this for a moment and feels overwhelming relief that she is at least recognizing the danger of withdrawing mentally and emotionally.

“You will go directly to them?” He asks, recognizing that she does not need her permission and as such he risks a hostile response. He is saved when all she does is nods in response.

“And you will wait for me to return?”

Another nod.

He is left staring at her, hands on his hips, frustrated but not wishing to dig himself a hole from which he will not be able to climb later. She stares back, willing him to agree with her eyes, and the solemn look eventually breaks him so he closes the distance between them and crushes her to his chest in a tight and desperate hug. She relaxes in his arms after a moment while he pushes down his fears and attempts to convince himself that he is not making the same mistake twice in his life.
12 years, 3 months later

Chapter Notes

Apologies for the delay all, life sometimes has a way of butting in.

One quick note - I realize that I numbered the first chapter incorrectly. It should read 12 years 3 months later (as it happens at the same time as the chapter you are about to read). I sketched out the story initially on paper and I’m not sure if it was just a transcription error or a brain fart on my part.

Thank you for all the encouragement and comments!

12 years, 3 months after death

“I’m furious with you.” Jon tells Sansa when he walks back into Winterfell and finds her standing on the rampart. He is seething with rage that has no other immediate outlet, and if she is affected by it, her face does not reveal it to be the case.

“I’ve already given back the crown. What else do you want from me?”

“A thank you would have sufficed! The barest recognition of what you owe!”

“How do you even say that to me, knowing what I have endured?!” She is defiant, but also sounds tired.

“It’s not a competition in suffering, Sansa. We don’t line up to be given land and titles and accolades based on what horror we had to live through. If that was the case, every peasant in the North would be King.”

“We have nothing more to say to one another, not if you don’t see that everything I have done has been for the North.”

Jon walks up to her until their faces are mere inches from one another.
“How many Northern men died in the Battle for Winterfell because you did not tell me that you had
struck a secret agreement with Littlefinger?” He asks, his tone measured but full of anger. “Do not
feed me this shit about being saviour of the North.”

She says nothing and he takes a step back to regain his composure.

“I blame myself for this calamity. I did not talk sense into you and I did not remove you forcibly
when I could have or should have because I kept thinking back to our father – yes, our father – as I
know no other, and how broken he would be if he saw what had happened to us.”

“Why do you think I fought so hard for the North?” Sansa asks defiantly. “Because I wanted the
Stark sigil to fly over Winterfell until the end of time. So that he wouldn’t have died for nothing.”

“And all this, the power, the throne, what has it done for you? What has it done for any of us?” Jon
shakes his head and goes on, “I was so angry with him for so long. I blamed him for setting my life
on a course that could not be reversed. I thought, if I had known that I was not a bastard, I would
have had hopes of a wife, children, the family I didn’t really have growing up. I would never have
taken the black. I wouldn’t have gone to the Wall. I wouldn’t have seen what is beyond it. I would
have been a different man.”

“You wouldn’t be King.”

“That was not my ambition nor was it his ambition for me.”

“He was a good man,” Sansa insists.

“Aye. He was honourable and he always did the right thing. But even right things and the best
intentions can have dire consequences. So are they really right at all?”

“What future is there for House Stark? Now that you’ve done away with me.” She says, but her
bitterness if half-hearted.

“Take a husband. Have children. Live a normal life. Continue the line. Forget all this politicking and
live a simple life. Coming here today, I wasn’t so sure you’d have the chance.”
“I suppose as opposed to being burned alive, it is tolerable,” she says and he sees a flash of the old Sansa.

“Then do it,” he says curtly, before continuing, “you should know that I am not coming back.”

“This is your home, still.”

“It has not been my home for a long time. I no longer feel like I have a home, and maybe it is time that I make one. But it will not be here, and I don’t know when we will see each other again. I made a promise to myself 3 years ago and then I made it every day since that day.”

“To be with her?” She guesses.

“To live the life I should have had. And you have written yourself out of it, as much as it pains me to speak such words out loud.”

“Then go.”

Jon walks out, slamming the door, and does not look back.

“It was a surprise to see you,” Grey Worm tells Daenerys after she arrives unannounced and he escorts her through the streets to her chambers in the Red Keep.

“I came in advance of the others.” She says simply.

“Is there a problem?” He asks, a frown coming over his face.

“No, I just wanted to travel on my own.”

“Does King cause you problems? After you help him again?”
“No, Grey Worm. But I appreciate your concern, old friend,” she says sincerely.

“I post two men at your door.”

She doesn’t argue with him even though she considers it unnecessary. It gives him something productive to do and she feels comforted knowing there is somebody here for whom her wellbeing is paramount to all else.

He describes the progress on the construction and the difficulties they have run into. She had worried about sending him to this place a couple of years ago but he seems unaffected by it and she doesn’t wish to stir old memories.

“My Queen?” He asks, and she senses hesitation.

“Yes?”

“I would like permission to go to Naath again. I can train local army to fight.”

She considers his words and swallows the ball in her throat that forms anytime she thinks of Missandei.

“She still comes to me in my dreams,” she says, “and I think that she shall, so long as I live.”

She watches the stoic man look away from her, not wanting to look her in the eyes and cause them both to break.

“I start to forget how she look,” he says, gaze trained on some undefined spot, “in Naath, everybody look like her. So I think, maybe I go and remember.”

Daenerys feels her jaw quivering despite her best efforts to maintain her composure.
“Of course. Go as soon as you are ready to leave. You do not need my permission and while my heart does not like to imagine the loss, it would be my honour to bid you goodbye if you should like to stay in Naath forever.”

“Thank you, my Queen.”

She notes that he does not decline her offer and it pains her to the core of her being, but she has asked more of him than any man should give in service of his Queen. She thinks back to a lifetime ago, when she first set him free and knows that this is the final chapter of that story.

“I hope that you find every happiness, Grey Worm.” She says sincerely.

Three weeks after she arrives in King’s Landing, she meets with Tyrion, and then she walks away from him for the last time. She replays his words about her and Jon, until doubt starts to creep in and she hates that she’s allowed him to get inside her head.

For a long time after she speaks with him, her heart continues to race and she feels like jumping out of her skin. She doesn’t question the words she spoke or the outcome of the meeting, but taken together with Grey Worm’s departure, she is keenly aware of old doors closing on her, one by one.

Ser Jorah.

Ser Barristan.

Lord Varys.

Tyrion Lannister.

Missandei.

Grey Worm.
She has outlasted them all, in one way or another. She has been waiting for years to forget her past and cast it aside, and now as she does so piece by piece, it leaves her feeling strangely bereft and alarmingly lonely.

“What happened to Ser Davos?” Daenerys asks Yara over supper one night.

“He was part of Bran the Broken’s council for the first three or four years, then he went to live in Stonedance, south and then east of here. Guess he could see this place turning into a shit hole and got out when he could.”

“I know the place – it is just south of Dragonstone. It was held by a house loyal to my family.”

“Yes, but the Masseys are no longer there. Ser Davos was granted a house when he wished for a simple life with his wife. She died a year later and he stayed. Not much to come back to here at that point.”

“I would like to see him.”

“He is old and unwell.” Yara cautions.

“So we will go to him. Can we ride?”

“It’s half a day, on a good horse. Why not take your dragon?”

“Drogon has gotten ornery in his old age and doesn’t much like strangers climbing on him. Unless you’d like to test that theory firsthand?”

“A stallion it is. But you are aware that the raven from the King gave me very clear instructions about how to keep you safe and restrained, I believe the words were.”
“You don’t strike me as a person who is easily told what to do.”

“He is my King.”

“And I am your Queen.”

“Alright, you’ve persuaded me.” Yara says and they share a smile.

The following morning, Daenerys meets Yara in the stables just after dawn. The woman looks up and down, smirking. Daenerys is dressed in skin tight smooth black leather riding chaps and a form fitting, sleeveless linen top with a complex lace corset in the back.

“You really are not from here.” Yara notes.

“It is what I wear to ride in Essos.”

“Well, we’ll have quite the audience of menfolk all the way across the peninsula. Children will be telling tales of a scantily clad Queen 50 years from now.”

“And you?” Daenerys guesses dryly, as she removes the horse’s saddle and easily mounts the animal without it.

“Does it bother you? I told the King that it would be a problem with the Faith.” Yara asks defiantly.

“I have faith in myself and little else, especially old men and women who presume to cast judgment on those of us who have to lead and stand for something that is actually real.”

“It’s not the way of this land.” Yara warns.
“And I’m not a woman from this land.”

They start out at an easy pace until they are out on the open road. They ride in silence for a few minutes before Daenerys speaks again.

“Sometimes I think my life would be much simpler if I had the same inclinations.”

“No, it wouldn’t,” Yara says, “men are simple things. All you have to do is make them feel like they are a King in their own right, listen to their inane banalities, and fuck them now and then. And the desperate ones don’t even care much what you look like.”

Daenerys can’t help but laugh at the description.

“If only I had met you earlier in life to give me counsel.”

“I’m not as pretty as him,” Yara says without naming names.

“You think that he’s too pretty?”

“I could do without the hair but by the look on your face that’s where our views begin to diverge.”

“You don’t approve?”

“Does it matter?”

“No, but I would still like to hear your thoughts. It is hard to remember the last time someone was willing to speak candidly with me.”

“It’s the dragons. Everyone’s afraid of ending up a bit too well done.”

“Harsh, but fair,” Daenerys says thoughtfully. “So?”
“So I think that you’ve already made up your mind and you’re looking for somebody to say out loud what you can’t bring yourself to. Which is why we’re going to see an old man who probably wants to forget all of us and die already.”

When Daenerys doesn’t respond, she goes on.

“He didn’t look at a woman twice, the whole time we travelled across this land. And every fat arsed Lord with a daughter of marrying age was prostrating himself at his feet. I tell you this in the unlikely case that I am wrong, and you still need convincing.”

A young servant girl leads here into a small house after Yara goes in first to greet Ser Davos on her own. Daenerys spots him lying, but with his back elevated on a bed by an open window overlooking the rocky coastline. He is much older, shockingly thin and his skin an unhealthy greyish tone.

“The Mother of Dragons.” He says in amazement.

“Ser Davos, it is wonderful to see you again.” She smiles, hoping that her eyes don’t betray the sadness she feels when she looks at him in his current state.

“And would you look at us both, we don’t look a day older!” He exclaims with the familiar glint in his eyes which lightens the mood in the room. She is embarrassed and grateful to him for doing so.

“Whatsoever I can do for you, Ser Davos, please consider it done. The maesters in Valyria are far more advanced than the ones here. You may be too frail to travel, but I could have them brought here.”

“Unless they’ve figured how to travel back in time and become young again, I don’t think it would be of much use, my dear.”

“We could try something.” She insists.

“Eh, I am at peace with what’s happenin’ to me. My wife died, most of the men I sailed with all my
life have died, even most of my children. It’s lonely being the last one left. I’m not looking to hold on.”

“Alright, I will say no more of it.” She promises.

They sit in companionable silence for a while before the old man speaks.

“I have heard of all that you have achieved. It is good to know that your story has a different ending.”

“Thank you.”

“And of all the things I’ve heard, I’m most jealous of your travels. There is nothing like life on the sea, that salty spray in yer face while your nether regions freeze in the punishing wind. The two sons I’ve got left, both sailors, must be something’ in our blood. I’ve seen many places but you’ve seen the whole world.”

“I have. And it is wondrous, you are right. And I’ve tried to be an honorable woman. To do things a different way.”

“Jon has assured me that you have.”

“Has he been making rounds selling the idea of me?”

“He doesn’t have to. It’s written all over his face.”

She takes a deep breath and sits down at the edge of the bed.

“This troubles you?” He asks, slightly confused.

“I can’t help but think back to that awful time. I saw Tyrion Lannister for the first time in years, and I told him that if somebody tells you that they love you but they aren’t willing to fight for you, then it’s just an empty promise. Do you think differently?”
“I think that you should judge the man that Jon is today, not the boy he was back then. I don’t want to presume to tell you that he didn’t love you then, but I wonder if he could have loved anyone. He was stumblin’ around with but one thing on his mind, and while most other men would have seen you and immediately drained all other thoughts from their head and other parts of their body, he isn’t like that.”

“I loved him. Even then. That is what gives me pause.”

“Women are always a step ahead, I’m afraid. You’ll have to forgive us.” He says with a laugh that turns into a cough.

Daenerys grabs a goblet filled with water that’s sitting on a table next to his bed and passes it to him, then takes it back when he’s done.

“I love him like he’s my own lad,” the old man says, his eyes shining with proud, unshed tears.

“I can tell.”

“You could both find happiness still. And lots of other things.”

She can’t help but laugh.

“Thank you for your counsel, Ser Davos. I am in your debt.”

“Just go and have a good life. Children, they are the greatest joy.”

She blinks quickly out of instinct, in case her emotions betray her and the tears come spilling down.

“I will keep that in mind.” She says simply. There is no point to tell the old man the whole story. Enough hearts have been broken over it, and she has no interest in adding to the count.
“Could I ask you for one other thing that you could do for me?” She implores.

“Does it require standing up?” He jokes, but sees the serious look on her face. “What is it?”

“You have served honorably as the Hand of the King. Will you now be the Hand of the Queen?”

“Your Grace, I wouldn’t be of much use from here. And despite what you may think, old farts don’t get any wiser as they age. I’m livin’ proof of that.” He quips and she has to laugh.

“You would please me greatly if you accepted, all those things notwithstanding, of course.”

“It would be my honor.” He says and she covers his frail hand with hers.

When Daenerys walks out of the house she sees Yara waiting for her, but walks away from her, holding a hand up to indicate that she wishes to be left alone. She walks over to the cliffs and looks out across the sea, in the direction of Dragonstone. She imagines that on a clearer day she may even be able to see it and wonders how many times Ser Davos had the same thought. She waits patiently for the tears to come, but they do not and she thinks that maybe it is a sign that she is coming to peace with her life.

She heads back to Yara, taking her time to look back at the sea once more before she turns around.

“The two sons of his that are still alive, have them summoned to King’s Landing. We will have to establish new trade routes to Essos and Sothoryos and I will need good seafaring men to run them. You will assure them that it will be more than worth their while.”

“Why not just ask Ser Davos to speak with them?”

“I do not wish anyone to know that I have decided to name them Commanders of the commercial fleet. I trust that you will see to it.”
When he arrives in King’s Landing, he runs around the fully rebuilt Red Keep aimlessly looking for her like a chicken who’s had its head cut off.

“The Queen rode south with Lady Commander Greyjoy this morning,” he is finally told by some attendant he’s never seen before, underscoring how little time he has spent at King’s Landing and how long his absence has been. He is somewhat pacified to know that she is not alone, but the darkening skies and menacing black clouds being blown quickly to the east by the gusting winds have him concerned all over again.

*She’s not a child*, he chides himself as he rushes to his quarters to wash his face and change into clean clothes laid out for him.

He notices a flurry of activity around and at least three times as many staff as usual and wonders what is going on, but not enough to push somebody for answers. Instead, he heads down, through the tunnels and outside to the King’s stables.

“Get me a horse,” he barks at the first stable hand he sees, then immediately regrets his tone and thanks the boy profusely when the horse is brought out, outfitted for a ride.

“Your Grace, the thunder and lightning are spooking the horses. The storm should pass quickly.” The boy says, expecting to be chided.

Jon mounts the horse regardless, but one look across the horizon and he recognizes that his idea is foolhardy. He curses under his breath – the weather, her decision to ride when she has dragons at her disposal, Yara’s apparent inability or unwillingness to control Dany’s impulses, his own lack of initiative in riding south alone sooner. Then he sees two figures, riding downhill, still a mile or so away. He watches them and as they get closer and he has no doubt about the identity of the riders, he calms down and dismounts, returning the horse’s reins to the boy.

He watches the two women approach almost as if they ride in slow motion and when they are close enough he can see Dany smiling at him. He feels frozen in place until the large drops of rain begin to fall aggressively from the sky and he can tell that they will be soaked to the bone in a matter of seconds.

“You’ll catch your death!” He admonishes as she stops in front of him and dismounts from her horse while Yara smartly gallops past them into the stable building.
She doesn’t respond, and instead marches up to him, throws her arms around his neck, drawing his face down and capturing his lips with hers. He is so shocked at first that it takes him a moment to recover, and then he does so enthusiastically, arms wrapping tightly around her, hands splayed across her lower back, bringing their bodies together until there is not a sliver of air left between them. He tastes her for the first time in a dozen years and instantly feels drunk as he lifts her off the ground ever so slightly until the sway back. He lets go to regain his footing but keeps his hands on her hips as he looks at her, amazed. They are wet from the rain, her hair tousled and sticking to her forehead, his dripping down his neck. He can feel the heat of her body through the impossibly thin linen of her top, in stark contrast to the cool rain falling from the sky.

“If you don’t start breathing again, you’ll be the one who has to worry about catching your death.” She teases, then takes his hand in hers and pulls him indoors.
Chapter Notes

Just a short(ish) little ditty I got out today before disappearing for the weekend. The children want to go to the beach and I'm happiest in the ocean, so off we go.

Thank you for all the kind reviews. Looking to wrap this up over the next couple of chapters and then take a break of a week or so before putting out a few more epilogue type chapters.

12 years, 4 months later

As soon as they’ve entered the stables, they are swarmed by attendants throwing blankets over them and ushering them through the dark passageways. Old women are scolding them for being foolish to stand out in the rain and he wonders how long it will take before the story of the King of the West and the Queen of the East disregarding all propriety in a rainstorm.

“You seem…happy.” He says, looking at her in surprise, realizing what a pessimist he had become. He spent the last 8 weeks worried sick about her and battling his inclinations to abandon the rest of the group and ride down quickly on his own to see her as soon as possible.

“It sometimes happens when I’ve been properly kissed.” She deadpans.

“Maybe I should have tried it sooner.”

“Well, now you know. It is good to be reunited.”

Two of Daenerys’ servant girls pull her towards her chamber, fussing with her wet hair.

“Come see me in the map room, when you’re dry?” She yells back at him.
When he arrives, she is meeting with the new master of coin, who eagerly greets Jon and starts to collect his scrolls.

“I asked the Queen for her counsel regarding our repayment terms.” He says by way of apology to Jon.

“Thank you, that is fine.” Jon replies and then stands there awkwardly while he waits for the man to leave. When he does, Daenerys sits down on the stone steps at the edge of the room and looks more serious and immersed in her duties than an hour ago when he’d seen her last. He tries to read her face.

“How did Tyrion take it?” Jon asks as he sits down on the stone step next to her.

“He understood,” is all she says.

“And you?”

“It was harder than I thought it would be,” she admits reluctantly.

“Are you regretting having done it?”

“No, I think that I could never get past what he’d done and that doubt would eat away at me for years to come. And as much as Tyrion always said that my worst impulses had to be tempered, he never recognized that the same was true of him.”

“It’s what happens when you always think that you’re the smartest person in the world,” Jon offers.

“Humility was not his strong suit.”

“What about me?”

“Hmm?”
“You say you could never get past what he’d done, but what I did was far worse. And I had a
greater obligation to you than he ever did.”

“Do you want me to dismiss you from my life?” She looks at him intently.

“You don’t need me to answer that.”

“Then what?”

“I have trouble reading you and your feelings about me. And I wonder if it is because you are not
able to forgive what in truth should be unforgiveable.”

“I have had to be unreadable to get to where I am. But perhaps I have become too good at it.”

“Just perhaps?” He teases with a smile.

“Tyrion said something to me, that troubled me for days after we spoke. He said that our relationship
is like a book that you’ve already read, we all know how it ends.”

*I should have strangled him with my bare hands when I had the chance,* Jon thinks.

“That’s absurd,” Jon says flatly.

“Is it?”

“He is reducing our life to a riddle. If that is not absurd, then what?”

“I don’t even know what he really meant. Are we bound to end up together? Or are we bound to
always end?”
“Tyrion Lannister cannot foretell the future. He’s not even particularly good at coming to terms with the past.”

“I know. But it did rankle me,” she admits.

“But the way you greeted me outside…”

“A lot of things happened after my conversation with Tyrion. I will tell you, someday. Now we get to clean up and look pretty for supper with the fat Lords.”

“I am not pretty,” he protests halfheartedly.

“Don’t make me regret my decisions, Jon Snow,” she says flirtatiously, flashing a bright smile his way. She extends her hands to him and pulls him up to his feet. He laces his fingers through hers and gives them a quick squeeze.

She is already seated for dinner when he arrives and the only seat left is on the opposite side of the long table.

He looks at her meaningfully, taking in the green dress that hugs her curves and leaves her sides bare. His imagines running his fingertips against her smooth skin, leaving burning trails behind and is left shifting uncomfortably in his seat.

Supper is polite and perfunctory, with the two Valyrian Lords joining them clearly relieved to be back in the lap of luxury after weeks of tortured travel. They eat, drink and praise the King for their hospitality profusely. The translator is working quickly, although Jon manages to pick up quite a bit more of what they are saying after spending.

Jon starts to sense that they are in no hurry to excuse themselves while he struggles to remain seated any longer. It is as if he is seeing the last 12 years flash before his eyes and for all the waiting he has done, he cannot fathom finding the patience to do it any longer. Thoughts of how he could possibly dismiss the room immediately, if not sooner, cross his mind. But he does not wish to offend them and he certainly does not wish to be the source of rumor on the very day he has returned.
“My Lords, please stay as long as you’d like. The King and I wish to turn in early for the night.” Daenerys interjects, showing no regard for how they will interpret her words.

When she rises, Jon follows in a hurry, thankful to be able to stop pretending what he’s really interested in this evening.

When they’re out of the dining room they walk through the halls wordlessly until they arrive at the juncture where his chamber is to the left and hers to the right. He lifts his hand up to her face and cups her cheek.

“A man once told me that I won’t find much joy in this life. I believed him until now.”

“Come with me.” She says simply and he does as he’s told.

Her two guards stand at the door of her chamber, moving aside as she enters and Jon follows. They do not make eye contact and Jon is inclined to send them away, but once the door shuts with a click, all extraneous thoughts leave his head.

She turns to face him, the shawl pinned to her dress at her left shoulder swirling in the air around her like she is an apparition.

He steps into her space, and touches his forehead to hers, eyes closed, just breathing her in. He can hear her ragged breath as he drops a kiss on the tip of her nose, then moves down so that he is kissing her with the desperation of a man who has been imagining this moment for too many years. He tastes the sweet post-dinner wine as their tongues slide against one another, and he snakes his left hand around her lower back, then pulls her close and grinds his hips against hers.

His right hand slowly slides from gripping her hip bone up across her belly and to the underside of her breast. His mouth breaks away from hers as his tongue traces a path down her jaw line and to her neck. She arches her head back as a sigh escapes her lips, emboldening him to cover her breast with his hand, fingers squeezing softly.

She flinches.
It is but an instant, so short and quick that one could even think it is an illusion. But he certainly felt it in the way her body froze then recoiled in his arms.

He pulls back to look at her and the shaken expression in her eyes tells him that he was right.

“Are you afraid of me?” He asks gently.

“What? No. No, I’m not afraid.”

“You flinched…I felt it.”

“It’s just my body reacting without thinking. I’m fine. Really.” She assures him and steps back into his orbit.

“I don’t want you to pull back from me. It shouldn’t be like that.”

“It is just my subconscious remembering your hand upon my chest…” she says, waiting for him to look her in the eye before going on, “I kissed you first today. I brought you back here. I don’t think that you should need any more assurance of what I want from you.”

But the spell is broken, and he retreats into himself, burdened by the grief mixing with guilt.

“I’m so sorry about this,” he says, running his fingers against her cheek.

She is frustrated and irritated by the sudden turn of events but senses that this is not the moment to push the matter further.

“Will you stay with me? Until I’m asleep?” She asks softly.

“If you want me to.”
“I do.”

She undresses slowly, or that is how it appears to him as her shawl slides down her shoulders, leaving them bare, followed by the dress that she is wearing, which she picks up off the floor as it falls into a puddle. When she is naked, she slips a loose linen sleeping gown over her head, and it falls over her curves gracelessly. She does not look at him and is not trying to be provocative, but he still has to swallow hard and curse himself seven times over for the direction the night has taken.

“Don’t be stupid,” she says as she climbs into bed and beckons him over. He walks over and sits down at the foot of the bed, directly opposite her, resting his back against the thick wooden post.

“What happens now?” Jon asks.

“I suppose you get to sit here for a really long time, because it takes me ages to fall asleep these days.”

“It wasn’t always this way?”

“No,” is all she says.

“What’s keeping you up today?”

She looks at him pointedly.

“Other than that.” He smiles ruefully.

“Men are not in the habit of refusing me. You’re going to give me a complex Jon Snow.”

“That’s not-“

“I know, I was just trying to lighten the mood.”
He leans back against the post, rubbing his face with the palm of his hand. She can sense how tired he is.

“I am holding a feast tomorrow.” She says, swiveling to a different topic.

“That explains all the people running around this place. Why?”

“Because the King is back,” she says and sees him make a face, “and because the people need a festive event to look forward to.”

“I hate those things.”

“So I’ve gathered. These things are not for our benefit. We get to sleep in grand chambers and eat what we like, when we like, have hot baths drawn for us and people serving our every need. For people out there, an evening of free food and drink goes a long way.”

“You seem like you’re at home here.” He notes

“I am sorry that I have ingratiated myself on your staff but I think that they are happy to have someone to fuss over finally. You should let them do things for you more often.”

“What kind of a man needs help dressing himself?”

“Everyone likes to feel useful,” is all she says.

He reaches over and rubs the soles of her feet with his thumbs absentmindedly.

“Why can’t you sleep?” He asks again, kindlier than before.

“I have had a lonely life. And the nights are loneliest of all.”
“I’m sorry.” He says for the second time in a night.

“I don’t want to be lonely anymore.”

“You won’t be.” He promises, his voice hoarse.

“And tonight?”

“Nevermind tonight, it’s nobody’s fault. Just life fucking with us. It won’t be the last time you find yourself with me in this chamber.”

“I should hope not.”

She lies down and turns on her side, so he can only see the profile of his face. It is illuminated by moonlight and appears as silver as her hair.

“Jon?” She asks after a minute.

“Yes?”

“If we are going to do this, then we have to do it completely, or not at all. Do you understand?”

“I would not have it any other way.” He assures her and she grows quiet again.

He watches over her as she turns over, to her back, her other side, and over again, her fingers methodically but subconsciously tracing circles over the smooth blanket that covers her. As her eyes grow heavy her breathing slows and he watches the rhythmic rise and fall of her chest until he is certain that she is asleep and that he would not be disturbing her by getting up. He does so and walks along the side of the bed and crouches down next to her face. He sweeps back the hair that has spilled across her forehead and tucks it behind her ear. He kisses her forehead, then her lips, lingering a moment longer than he should if the goal is to have her stay asleep and stealing the puff of air that she exhales. But she does not wake and he walks out quietly.
The guards meet him with sideways glances and he hurries past them. When he reaches the end of the hall and looks around the corner at the door of his chamber it takes him only a moment to turn back on his heels, tell the two men to take the night off and let himself back into her chamber.

He strips down to just his undergarments and climbs in next to her, where he easily falls asleep for the first time in what feels like a lifetime.

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